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HYSTERIA: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

by

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B.A., Indiana State University, 1975

M.A., Indiana State University, 1982

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

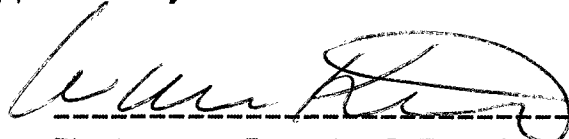
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Christmas 1967

Jed was wrapped cozy as a guru in his dirty green sheet. From his seat on the second story fire escape he had a street-lit view of the side door of the Duds-n-suds where his clothes spun in the dryer as he sipped his Spanada and dangled his legs in the cool breeze off the bay. If anyone should try to exit stage left with his clothes he imagined that he could leap off the fire escape right onto the thief's head--or better yet he could throw his half-empty half-gallon of wine at the laundry burglar and stun him long enough to climb down the ladder and rescue his clothes.

He had good reason to be paranoid about his laundry; only one pair of jeans, two shirts and three pair of dingy shorts remained. The rest had been carried off by laundromat thieves before he'd left for Mexico the month before, which was okay, really, since he didn't need many clothes clothes in Mexico. But this San Francisco December was chilly, at least something like December ought to be, and he needed those clothes. Even if his family sent him another Christmas CARE package, he would have to wear something down to the post office to get it.

Lola came to the doorway behind him and leaned there: He could feel her. Her eyes were black holes in the gray

skies of another world. Lola loved to eat acid, and acid seemed to have eaten her flesh away to sheer glass that revealed the network of blue veins beneath it. One of her thin arms drifted toward him and her finger hooked into the fold of his sheet, tugging for attention. He twisted his head toward her, "Man, you're a drag," she said. "Why don't you split?"

He slugged the wine behind his lips and swallowed. Its red glaze sweetened his smile.

"I live here," he said.

She turned her head slowly from side to side, blond hair dragging on her shoulders. "I live here now. Me and Dave...we don't need you."

"You need my rent money," he reminded her. "I'm paid up this month."

"You don't have any money."

"I'm paid up this month."

"You split with that chick. You gave it up."

"Now I'm back," he said. "And I gave you up, not this place."

Her body stiffened in the shadows; she looked ghostly in the shapeless gauze of her floor-length dress. Her eye flashed, rounded in the glare she leveled on him. "Bullshit," she hissed. "I hate you."

He laughed; it echoed off the wall and down the alley. Lola stepped back inside and left him shaking with his

laughter.

Brian pulled the edge of the sheet over his knees, remembering how a sweet young Lola had come sniffing after him the day they met. It was no big deal; when you played in a street band on the Haight lots of chicks floated in on the music and sniffed around the musicians. A hatful of money meant good time supplies, food and drugs and wine to wash them down with, and a hatful of money was more than most dudes had to offer those days. Lola was meatier then, softer. He took her home with him because...why not? But then he got an invitation from a newcomer with money and a car, a rich homely bitch, but ah, Mexico....and Lola had wriggled her ass right into his friend Dave's bed, in his own damn apartment. Funny how that worked--how you laid a chick a couple of times and she wouldn't let go. All of them did it. They sucked you up like vacuum cleaners almost, right back inside where you came from, if you let them.

Red, green and gold lights flashed in a store window across the street. A plastic reindeer pranced in the breeze on its streetlight hanger. Brian took another slug of wine and thought about Christmas. He wondered if twenty-seven was too old to be thinking about Christmas back home, where it was sometimes white and sometimes slushy, but never the sort of Christmas you could spend sitting on a fire escape in a sheet.

He always remembered the Christmas when his mother gave him nine hats. When he was nine years old. His mother was into things like that, matching ages and numbers like candles on a cake. He couldn't recall even asking for one hat, but he guessed his mother knew all about the craze of Davey Crockett coonskin hats. She came through the front door with her eyes barely visible between packages and the wet bangs plastered to her forehead. He looked up from the T.V. and she covered the top of the shopping bag with her arm... Don't look--I didn't slip through the slush so you could ruin your surprise...and she sat there on the edge of her chair in a pink bathrobe watching his face box after box... hard hat, tri-corner, pith helmet, fireman, cowboy, Robin Hood, Sherlock Holmes and Davey Crockett, baseball cap... stacked on his head and falling as the picture was snapped and Elly said Hats? That's all? and Jed, the cowboy, spit through his grin and put a finger bullet through her heart.

A dark figure came through the laundromat's alley door; Jed gripped the metal railing above his head and leaned forward. The stranger carried something in his hands, heavy, not clothes, and he heard the clack of pop bottles. Jed relaxed as a match blazed on the kid's face and the tip of his cigarette traced his path back inside....two cases at two cents a bottle easily enough for another bottle...just then he thought he'd have to do without, and his clothes would be dry soon.

Footsteps; the light behind him blotted out. Jed turned to see Dave filling the doorway. He lifted the bottle to his friend, who waved it aside.

"You got Lola really upset, my man," Dave said. "She doesn't want you here. Comprende?"

"Si si," Jed replied, "but I have no place to go. Mexico sucked me dry."

"She says if you don't get out tonight she does," Dave said in his acid edged voice. He raised his arms, and braced them against the doorway; the streetlight caught his red bush of hair so that it shimmered around his face. Jed could tell the acid had him feeling bigger than he really was, as if the hum of false energy in his veins might enable him to press the walls of the building aside.

"I'll remove myself from your love nest as soon as I can," Jed told him with an upturned hand.

"Look, you mother, I've disappeared a hundred times for you. Slept out in the hall so you could screw in peace. So how's about you disappear, pronto." Dave leaned low into Jed's face, his long arms spread like wings above and behind and disappearing into the dark.

"Okay, okay," Jed relented. "Soon as my clothes are dry." It wasn't the first time a woman had come between them. Jed was the handsomer though smaller of the two, and even before they'd made the trip from Illinois together, women Jed threw off sometimes went to Dave for comforting.

Dave, unfortunately, convinced himself it was pure charm that won them. If he was straight I could reason with him...

Dave looked satisfied. He cocked his head smugly and bapped a giant hand against Jed's shoulder. "Right on, Brother," he said. "Merry fuckin' Christmas." He pitched himself back inside, bellowing for Lola.

"Merry Christmas to you, you crazy ass prick," Jed muttered with a mocking toast. The wine, at least, felt at home and warm in his stomach, and the sky was clear with the promise of sunshine tomorrow...I'll sleep in the park if nothing comes up...He pulled himself to his feet, adjusted his sheet and descended the ladder to the alley.

After pulling on jeans that were damp and clung to him like scales to a fish and the shirt his sister had sent him that was dry everywhere but the arm pits he bundled the rest of his clothes into the sheet. A glance in the restroom mirror showed him sun-bronzed with a brilliant flash of teeth. His thick black hair and sprawling beard formed a flattering frame for the perfect symmetry of his features. Maybe some mamasita make sa casa mi casa eh Jeddito..?

Share the wealth and all that jive.

Outside he studied the stacked cases of bottles and decided he could cash in two at the most, carrying them under the sheet. There were five altogether and it was a great compromise, but without wheels he wouldn't get far and any

store in the area would be suspicious of a hippie with everything from Choco-cola to Mason's Root beer anyway. Not as easy as playing in the street band even for a man who didn't play the flute...which he'd borrowed from the top shelf of his sister Elly's closet when she retired from the high school band and pawned after Dr. Schizo's Rhictor Six booklets door to door...printed in the basement of a dude named Politico...when the police started asking around, he and Dave had burned them in a trash can...a blaze of such proportions that they'd called the firemen themselves and the police dumped the rest of the soggy mess in a plastic bag and I said Thataway, officer...two adolescent hoodlums committed arson and fled thataway while my friend and I sipped tea on our fire escape...The thought set him laughing aloud as he pitched his laundry onto the escape and pulled himself up after it.

Inside Dave and Lola were laughing too, but it drifted out to him too loud and uncontrolled, chilling as the breeze creeping into his wet pants. He had laughed just so himself and knew well how ungenuine it really was. They sounded desperate to be children again but the pain inside their laughter collapsed it. He stood straddling his laundry, feeling like the sucker in the greatest rip-off that ever was. In a week she'll drive him crazy with her bitching and clinging and Dave and I will laugh about this...I can see it...crazy to put us both through all this for love

that exists no place outside her own head...The resentment grew inside him, honed by the sound of her high screaming laughter, and he wanted to--had to--assert his right to be there one last time.

A cup of tea seemed to be in order.

Jed stepped through the door and strolled into the kitchen with an air of purpose and confidence about him. Dave and Lola were wrestling on the couch. Somewhere they had picked up a bottle of Bubble-Blo and were fighting over possession of the little plastic ring. Bubbles, big and small, floated about the room and burst in silent explosions against the walls and floor.

Humming through a smile, Jed filled a dimpled sauce pan with water and flipped on the gas burner. Considering their obliviousness to his presence, he thought they might even come down and crash before he had to leave.

Just as he sat down before his steaming cup, Lola came running past him with her mouth wide open and her tongue stuck out and wriggling as if to escape. Jed surmised she'd gotten a dose of Bubble-Blo in her mouth as she gagged and sputtered, diving for the faucet. She stuck her head under the running water and let it fall over her tongue. When she straightened and saw him, calmly dipping a Red Zinger tea bag into his cup, her face solidified in a pale, hard glare.

"I thought Dave told you to split," she said.

"Come on, Lola," Jed grinned; "you wouldn't deny a man

his last cup of tea would you?"

"I didn't rip off that tea for you."

"I'll leave a nickel on the counter."

"Just drink it and split."

"You're a hard woman, Lola. I guess my instincts were right about you."

"What do you mean?" It was a demand, fast and hard.

"You ever look in the mirror while you were tripping, Lola? Huh? I can tell you what you'd see. You'd see a spider, Lola, a big mean hairy old spider with blood on her pincers from all the men she'd trapped and devoured. You are evil, Lola. You're poison. Go look. Can't you just feel those slimey hairs all over?"

She seemed to shrivel in the flickering light as Jed calmly sipped his tea and eyed her over the rim. Trembling all over she clawed and rubbed her bare arms, saying, "No no no--off--get it off," and slid down the counter into a limp and whimpering heap on the floor.

Dave appeared beside Jed like a heaving mountain, pulsing and weaving unsteadily in the bright fluorescent light. "What did you do to her?" he demanded.

"Just had a little chat."

"Yeah," Dave sneered. "I know your mouth, my man."

He swatted the cup out of Jed's hand; it crashed against the wall and shattered on the floor. With steps that rattled the dirty dishes in the sink he crossed the

room and snatched a long knife from the drain. He was the devil then with his red hair burning brighter from the power in his hand, and he returned to face Jed, the knife posed and twitching cobra-like, butting circles in the space before Jed's eyes. His own eyes glazed green in their slits, pinched against the bright light overhead.

Jed stood slowly. "You don't need that, Man. This is Jed talkin'. Remember Jed?" But as he backs against the wall the knife follows, quivering with the tension in the hand that holds it.

"Get out." All the while the knife's threatening point holds Jed against flat to the wall, he repeats, "Get out, motherfucker, get out, get out."

"Back off. I will, just back off with that thing." He does not believe Dave sees him with those eyes. He rolls his head back and farther against the wall that holds him and the knife twitches inches from his face. He is frozen as if nothing existed before this moment and nothing will follow. It is the knife...the knife that must go away...and so he snatches the blade in his right hand and feels its edge sink to bone and slice as Dave lets go and it slides through his flesh to the floor. Stupid...stupid...he thinks as the blood dripping on the floor between them reminds him that he's hurt, even though there is only numbness and a spasm of trembling in his hand.

Lola fell silent and stared.

"Man--oh man, I'm sorry, I'm sorry--oh god..." Dave cried. His tears fell as uncontrollably as his anger had raged, and engulfing Jed in his arms he carried him to the sink where he thrust the bleeding hand under a stream of cold water while supporting his limp body against his own. Jed let him. He watched his blood swirl in the bottom of the sink like red Kool-aid, and still it poured out of the gaping slice in his palm where the water showed him fatty bubbles of his inner skin and a white flash of bone. It did not look or feel like his hand, but an object detached and floating. If the shock had removed itself from between him and his pain he would have been sickened by it, but he only stared, unbelieving.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry," Dave repeated again and again, until Jed jerked his hand from the big man's grasp and staggered away. He turned his back on them both as if they were not real, feeling himself unreal, floating. On the fire escape he rifled through the clothes and, finding a white t-shirt, wrapped it tightly around the throbbing hand, then made his way slowly and awkwardly down the metal ladder. To his left was a dead end. To his right an amber pool of streetlight awaited him like an oasis at the mouth of the alley. He stumbled toward it. He waded in it, thinking of all the cluttered, people-packed, smoke-filled rooms he could go to...they will get me high and throw me a dirty blanket like a dog and when I get high enough I'll

laugh and tell them how Dave freaked out and came at me.... and he walked the fringes of that circle of light, not knowing where to take himself, with his hand soaking the wrapping that he held pressed to his belly.

Passersby eyed him and swerved out of his way, except for an old man whose gaze was on the ground. He collided with Jed and the two of them stopped for a moment, only for the moment it would take to step aside and move on, but from the depth of his dreaming walk he was drawn away by the sight of a bloody shirt, inches from his drooping nose. Quickly he lifted faded eyes to the young man's face and Jed's dark eyes met him with their frightened, lost appeal. The old man squinted, studying that face, then fumbled a chattering hand into the pocket of his baggy suit pants. He reached for Jed's good hand and pressed a quarter in it. "Here, Boy. Call your mother for Christmas," he growled. "And get that hand looked to 'fore it kills you."

Blind Fish

Elly Gordon slid down in the passenger seat of her Vega and planted her feet flat against the dashboard. The trip to Rockville wasn't a long one, only twenty-five miles, but anything over ten made her like to settle into the seat like she was on her way across country. Besides, it was a rare treat to have someone else drive for her and Dave was doing a fine smooth job of it. She pulled her heavy wheat-colored hair up off her neck with one hand and dug her head into the seat to watch the blacktop slip away between her toes.

They were passing by the hog farm where Elly recognized a friend, a big mama sow that was grunting around her her favorite corner of the pen with what looked like a hundred piglets moving in and out around her feet. Elly wiggled her fingers in a wave. She knew the sow from riding that stretch between Highland and Rockville twice a day the previous spring, when she was working the University Theatre Department to set up shows in the old Ritz Theatre. The countryside along the road was all rich farmland and patches of woods, but it was only pretty to look at once in awhile, not twice a day for six weeks. Still, it was good to see Big Mama again.

"What are you doing?" Dave had caught the movement of her hand from the corner of his eyes.

"Just waving at somebody."

That was good enough for Dave. His dark eyes set steady on the road again and his face resumed its usual serious attitude. Elly continued staring at him, still amazed by how handsome he was to her after the months they'd spent together. His dark red hair hung to his shoulders and his heavy beard with a few streaks bleached red by the sun framed his straight nose and full lips perfectly. She wondered how many people guessed he was thirty. She knew, if they did, they probably thought he was a dirty old man, since she certainly didn't look any older than she was. When she imagined their disapproval, it made her smile, considering herself a pretty lucky eighteen-year-old.

"Where do you want to eat in Rockville, " she asked, not really caring.

"The Good Time Cafe, of course. We can get some sandwiches to go, too, to eat at the park."

"I would have fixed some, if you hadn't been in such a hurry this morning. What's the big deal about Turkey Run anyhow?" Elly asked. "I've been there thousands of times. I thought everybody from Highland had."

Dave shrugged. "Just something I want to see, that's all."

His quiet tone clued Elly that he didn't want to talk,

which wasn't unusual for Dave, but it was something she'd had to get used to without ever learning to like the silence. The long quiet stretches between them always made her wonder what he was thinking, but afraid to ask, just like with her brother Jed. She turned her eyes back to the passing trees, thinking maybe she was a fool for putting up with something she hated so much. But, she reminded herself, if Jed snapped out of it when he fell in love maybe Dave would, too.

The memory of her older brother's dull, empty eyes when he stepped off the bus from San Francisco the summer before helped her hold her tongue with Dave. They were the same eyes Dave had first layed on her, just after he returned from Morocco. Elly was haunted by the memory of those encounters all the time, they seemed to fuse together in her mind and arouse a vague fear in her. Jed reappearing after two years from what she'd envisioned as the mecca of Haight-Ashbury, his face completely sunken, hugging his left hand to his chest in a dirty blood-soaked bandage. Then Dave sauntering across the campus, a tan, handsome stranger just back from a foreign land basking in romance, but with the same despondence in his gaze. Elly dispelled the vision with an involuntary shudder and glanced at Dave.

He responded with a quick look at her face, then turned back to the road.

"What's the matter, Elly? You don't look too happy.

Don't you want to make this trip?"

Elly forced a smile and spoke in a lively voice.

"Sure. I was just spaced out, thinking, that's all." After a pause she added, "I really wish we could smoke some dope, Dave. You sure you don't want to?"

She knew the answer before she finished the question, by the scowl on Dave's face. He sighed heavily and shifted in his seat.

"Nope," he said quietly. "Go ahead if you want to, but I wish you wouldn't."

His calm, low voice never betrayed anger or anything else, never gave Elly anything to latch onto and fight with which was very frustrating for a girl from a family of yell-ers. She glared at the road, her lips tightened against the temptation to ask "Why?" because she knew it would come out too loud and hard.

After a moment, she dropped her feet to the floor and opened the glove box. She grabbed the baggy and papers and commenced rolling a joint. She could feel Dave look at her but she kept her eyes on her business, feeling the tension in her relax as she performed the familiar act. When she finished it was fat in the middle and too skinny at the ends, but she was too eager to feel the effect of the smoke to let that bother her.

After a couple of hits she relaxed in her seat again. She felt in control of her voice and said calmly, "I still

don't understand why you quit, Dave. I mean, the way you look makes everybody assume you smoke dope anyway."

"That's their problem," he said. "It's not because I'm worried about getting busted."

"Okay," she said with simple acceptance. "Then why?"

Dave didn't answer right away. The smoke was filling the car so he rolled down the window, the lines of his face tightened in thought.

"I just don't need it anymore," he said. "I don't want to use getting stoned as an escape from my problems. Can you understand that?"

"Sort of," Elly replied, taking another drag. "It does make you feel better, but it's just fun to do." She focused her blue eyes directly on him. "I have no desire to quit at all and I think you're being unreasonable to make me feel guilty about it."

Her voice was a little testier than she intended, but it felt good to get it out. This change in Dave's attitude had only occurred a couple of days before, so she figured it would pass like it did with everybody else who said "I Quit," including Jed. But she rebelled instantly when she felt she was being preached at by someone who was on a self-improvement kick.

"Well, I'm sorry, Elly," Dave said finally, looking at her with a sad droop to his eyes. "It's just that I've been at it more years than you, and I know it's destructive."

Besides..." his voice drifted off the last word and he shook his head, not wanting to continue.

Elly had nothing more to say either, knowing words wouldn't lead anywhere at that moment. She sensed that something had happened to his hand. "I cut it, he'd say with a shrug, then retreat to the back yard to sit for hours, trying to strum chords on her guitar with only the tips of his fingers free from the bandage. Their mother made him go to the family doctor to have it looked at, since the bandage was so filthy. The doctor told them the cut ran the length of his hand, almost to the bone, between the thumb and fore-finger and that he had to redo the stitches because they were too loose to let it heal right.

They were coming to the light where Rockville's Main Street met the highway, so Elly put the roach out and rolled down the window to toss it out. The little farm town's sheriff was notorious for finding excuses to search long-hair cars. She stuffed the baggy down the back of her cut-offs and patted it down flat, just in case. The sight of the sheriff's car in front of the Good Time drew a self-satisfied smile across her face.

"Well, well, well," she said with a laugh. "So the big pig is taking a coffee break. I hope the sight of us dirty hippies ruins his appetite."

Dave frowned and shoved the car into park. Elly started to open the door, but Dave turned sideways in his

seat to face her and cupped his hand over her shoulder. When she turned back expectantly her eyes were flickering with anticipation of the adventure they'd have inside and her grin accented the glow in her cheeks, Dave smiled at the pretty picture she made pushing her hair behind her shoulder.

"Take it easy on the old sheriff, okay?" He recognized her excited expression, which was as good as a dare to any authority that might get in the way of her having some fun. "There's no reason to take any chances."

Elly narrowed her eyes resentfully. "Don't worry, I can handle myself."

Dave smiled slightly and brushed his fingertips along the curve of her shoulder. In his low smooth tone he said, "I know, but sometimes you act like you're invulnerable, like you're in a protective bubble or something. The dope gives you false confidence."

Elly scowled, jerking her shoulder away. "Let's go eat," she said flatly, as she stepped out of the car. Her body was stiff with angry resentment, mostly because she knew Dave was right and he'd checked her. I never take big chances, she thought, but testing the limits is exciting--especially when you get away with it.

The Good Time was mostly white formica walls and tabletops with gold specks, a counter with swivel stools and booths along the opposite wall. The room was long and nar-

row, high-ceilinged with three old fans suspended from it, the blades spinning too slowly to do any good. All the booths were empty, but there were four old men seated on the stools at the far end of the counter. The tan sheriff's uniform and shiny black belt stood out in the middle of the denim overalls and faded shirts of the others. They were laughing in gravelly voices, one man lapsing into a terrible cough that wouldn't stop.

Elly and Dave sat in the first booth, Elly facing the huddle at the counter. The waitress, a teenager who bulged out of her white uniform, slid slowly off her seat on the cooler near the men and shuffled over to draw two glasses of water. The men acted her movement and twisted around to see who had come in. Elly couldn't stifle a grin when the four pairs of eyes landed on her for a moment, followed immediately by a collective grimace and the heads turning away. The sheriff muttered something that made the others chuckle and shift positions so they could snatch occasional glimpses of strangers without being too obvious.

"So what's the verdict," said Dave, frowning at her.

Elly picked up a menu and layed it flat on the table in front of her. She figured her words would be deadened if she spoke into the tabletop.

"Oh, they think I'm a free hippie chick with nice tits. They can't tell from your back whether you're a girl or a boy, so you're safe till they see your beard." She

giggled and decided on the pancakes.

"What you don't seem to realize," Dave began in a low, serious tone. "Is that when you make your cute little put-downs, I'm the one who gets his ass kicked."

Elly glared at the top of his head bowed over the menu. She was about to speak when the waitress came up with her nylons swishing between her fat thighs. Instead of saying "Can I help you?" or "Good morning" or anything, she just stood next to the table with her pad poised, staring boredly at the wall.

"I want pancakes," said Elly with a saucy smile. "And a class of moo."

Elly drew her legs up on the seat and scooted over to sit sideways with her back against the wall:

Dave threw Elly a warning glance and folded his menu.

"I'll have a couple of eggs over easy and some orange juice," he said. "We also want about four tuna fish sandwiches to go."

The waitress moved away in silence. Dave rubbed his eyes with the tips of his fingers and sighed.

"You know what?" Elly's face was bright again. "I wonder how the court would handle it if the old sheriff stuck his hand down my pants for the evidence."

Dave made a point of talking at about half of the volume Elly was using. He leaned forward over his hands clasped in front of him.

"Well, he just might do that if you don't keep your mouth shut."

"No way," said Elly, looking over the tip of her upturned nose. "You're just getting paranoid in your old age."

"Just think of it as older and wiser," he said, tipping the fork up by its prongs. "I'll bet your brother would think you were acting pretty foolish, too."

Elly sneered, stung by his mention of Jed because he knew it would affect her.

"Well, he sure doesn't approve of me messing around with you," she snipped. "He thinks you're corrupting his little sister. "

"Among other things," said Dave. "Jed used to be a good friend of mine, you know. We lived together out in San Francisco."

Elly eyed him curiously, wishing he would say more, but the cloud had covered his eyes again. His expression was so sad that she was afraid to urge him with questions. She wondered why Jed had blown up when she told him she was sleeping with Jed, but she'd shrugged it off as his old brotherly protective instinct coming out again. She went into her own daze, twirling the salt and pepper shakers between her fingers as she recalled Jed's angry expression and the horrible things he'd called her that night.

"Jed never said much about San Francisco," she said

finally. "It was a big bummer for him, I guess."

Dave nodded soberly. The waitress waddled over and thunked the plates down in front of them.

"That'll be four-twenty," she drawled.

Dave payed her and they began eating in silence. The sheriff left just before they finished, walking past as if they weren't even there. Dave saw him glance in the window of their car before climbing into his own, but apparently he wasn't in the mood to hassle hippies that day.

They collected their sandwiches and left. It was only another half an hour to Turkey Run and they spent the time silently, except for Elly's occassional comments on the height of the corn and some appaloosas that were grazing along the shoulder of the road. Dave responded in monosyllables that discouraged Elly from talking much. She was regretting the bad feelings between them that she'd encouraged before, wishing everything could be easy and good again, but she didn't know how to return to that good humor with Jed in such a wierd frame of mind.

Since it was a week day, the state park wasn't crowded at all. They parked near the entrance to the main trails, marked by woodburned signs with the words and arrows painted in bright yellow.

"Should we take the sleeping bags or come back for them?" Elly asked the question good-naturedly as soon as they stepped out of the car.

"Later," Dave replied. He shaded his eyes to look up at the sky, which was brilliant blue with a few puffy clouds. But in the north there were heavy dark clouds on the horizon. "It may rain by evening and we'll have to go back."

Without asking Elly where she'd like to go, he plodded off in the direction of the Devil's Ice Box, a mile-long trail that Elly had never been on before. Her favorite trail led through the rock-walled canyon to a huge waterfall only a half-mile into the woods, but if Dave wanted to see the Devil's Ice Box it was okay with her.

The shadows of the thick old sycamores engulfed them, the temperature seemed to drop ten degrees and the damp that clung to the undergrowth soaked in to give their skin a clammy feeling. Elly found the cool air refreshing and tripped along behind Dave as if the heat of the sun had weighted her down before.

In a few minutes they reached the suspension bridge that extended high over Sandy Creek. They stopped in the center of it and leaned over the rusty cable to watch the rushing water, cold and shimmering because of the sand basin reflecting the bright sun overhead. That bridge always made Elly think of the ones in movies about Africa, where the cables snapped as the safari crossed, sending several porters to a screaming death in the white water, and probably pirhanas, thousands of feet below.

"Let's make it rock, Dave. Want to?"

Dave responded to her hopeful expression with a shake of his head. "I'd rather just keep moving so we can spend more time at the Ice Box," he said, continuing across the bridge.

Elly scowled and followed, stretching her legs apart and shifting her weight heavily with each step in an attempt to rock the bridge by herself, but Dave's even pace in the center made it useless.

"Did you know," she said, "that when troops crossed bridges like this during the war they had to break step? They found out that the vibrations from marching snapped the cables." She giggled. "Must have been funny, all those soldiers taking a plunge before they figured out what was happening."

Dave threw a smile at her over his shoulder. "Yea", he said with a chuckle.

Elly sighed, relieved that she'd finally broken through the tension.

Once over the bridge they sunk into the woods again and the trail became more narrow and rough. They were descending along a creek bed-sided by immense walls of sandstone that rose about a hundred feet above them. There was a trickle of inch-deep icy cold water at their feet and all the stones in it were coated with a slimy moss that made it hard to keep a foothold, but walking in the stream with

wet feet was easier than trying to maneuver along the slanted rocks at its edges. The stone walls were cut with deep gouges that left many overhanging cliffs, from when the stream was the rushing river of a melting glacier that wore the rock away. The rock formations were the residue the glacier collected on the way down the continent and left behind in great piles as it inched its way back. There were chinks out of the rock where fossil hunters had chisled for souvenirs and indentations in the boulders that Elly liked to imagine were the frozen footprints of prehistoric creatures.

She didn't stop to examine anything, partly because Dave was clipping through the canyon as fast as possible and partly because the sunless chill and damp urged her to keep moving. There damn well better be a patch of sunlight at the end, she thought, noticing the goose bumps on her bare arms.

After a quarter of a mile or so, the walls began to widen and let some sunlight spill to the bottom. Just before a sharp curve in the trail, Elly spotted a dry flat rock big enough to sit on.

"Wait a minute, Dave," she called. "I want to take my shoes off." The echo of her words bounced on ahead as she sat down and Dave walked back to meet her.

"It'll just be harder to keep your balance," he said. "Carrying your shoes."

"Naw," she said, planting a swift kiss on his cheek.

He pressed his hand behind her head to pull her back for a longer kiss and Elly responded eagerly, a rush of revived feeling flowing through her in that moment of contact as if she'd forgotten the love in Dave's touch. She nuzzled her face against his shoulder, eyes closed, enjoying the mild sweaty odor of his skin.

"Elly?"

"Hmmm."

"I'm sorry if I've been cold lately." His voice was low and resonant within his chest. "It's just that I've been going through some changes lately, about things that don't really include you. I can't explain it yet."

Elly rolled her eyes up to look at his strong face, shivering at the sight of its deep lines, set hard with thinking.

"Then don't talk about it," she said. "I love you, Dave. No matter what."

He smiled weakly, giving her shoulders a squeeze, and stood. His eyes skitted nervously to the top of the canyon, avoiding Elly's steady gaze.

"You ready to move on?" he asked, too cheerfully.

His back was turned to Elly's nod and he didn't look back to see that she was following, head down, slowly, until he reached the turn in the path. He waited until she got a few paces behind him, then resumed his pace. Elly moved

stiffly, as if propelled by some force against her will, stunned by Dave's failure to say he loved her back. For the first time the changes she'd sensed in him had a direct effect on her and she couldn't dismiss them with a laugh. There was a dull ache in the pit of her stomach.

The trail wound up in a dead-end bowl of rock. But it had been civilized. There were steps out into the rock that led up to a shelf about ten feet above. Dave climbed up them and Elly followed, the sunshine pouring into the bowl so intensely compared to the trail that she was blinded to everything but the steps by the glare. There were low voices drifting down from the top and her curiosity overcame her sad daze as she climbed.

At the top there were more steps, wooden ones that reeked of creosote, extending into a deck that lay over a large pool of crystal water. The pool fronted the mouth of a huge cave. Sitting on the deck railing were two teenaged boys wearing Turkey Run t-shirts. Just below them in the pool two very skinny canoes bobbed against the dock.

"Wanna take a ride?" The boy with red hair tossed his cigarette down and landed on it as he hopped down and came toward them.

"Yeah," said Dave.

"That'll be a buck apiece," he said, grabbing hold of a wooden pole that was taller than he was.

Elly stood staring at the mouth of the cave, which

seemed to stare back like an ominous pitch black eye.

"Dave, I don't know about this," she said, shivering.

"Aw, there's nothin' in there to hurt ya, Lady," the boy said. He took the money Dave held out to him and jerked his arm for them to follow.

Dave turned to look at Elly with solemn eyes, reaching his hand out to her. She passed by his hand and went to the edge of the dock.

When they were both seated, the boy stood in the rear and scraped against the rough walls of the narrow cave, the water gurgling with each stroke of the boy's pole. Elly gripped the edge of her seat and faced the black dampness wide-eyed, Dave's warm breath brushing rhythmically against her back. She wanted to reach back and touch him but couldn't loosen her grip. The nose of the canoe bumped the wall hard, jerking them forward, then she sensed that they were veering to the left and the dripping walls drew farther away. Suddenly a ripple of light danced on the water just ahead, then grew brighter as they fully rounded the gradual turn.

They drifted to halt in an opening the size of a small room, lit up by a row of lanterns suspended from one wall. The light shone straight through to the jagged rock bottom. Elly twisted round to look at the others, almost surprised to see their colors so clearly again. Dave was leaning over the side, gazing intently into the water.

"Look, Elly," he said in an excited whisper.

She bent over the side and saw about five large fish, about the the size of gib cat fishes, lolling lazily at the bottom. Their sloped heads and wide mouths made her think of grinning idiots and their pale, flesh-colored skins were almost translucent. Just behind their extended feelers were large fleshy bumps one on either side of the head. Elly found them eerie looking, but couldn't help staring.

"Them fish you see," drawled the boy, "are the same as they been for a million years. Prehistoric. They don't have no eyes cause they live in these dark caves and underground streams. Just don't need 'em cause they find their way around by them feelers."

"They have eyes," said Dave in a low voice. "The skin has just grown over them from disuse."

"Wierd lookin', ain't they," the boy chuckled. "You ready to go?"

He was looking hopefully at Elly because Dave didn't respond, so she nodded her head and the boy turned them around and shoved them back into the darkness.

It was beginning to rain when they reached the outside and the thick dark clouds told Elly that a real thunder and lightening gusher was on the way. Good, she thought, I really don't want to stay here. She bounded down the steps, not wanting to look at Dave or even be close to him because she was scared of what he might say. Since they would

obviously have to head for the car, she slipped and slid along the trail as quickly as she could, hoping she could delay any contact at least until they were in the car.

"Elly-y-y-y!"

Dave's call bounced off the walls ahead of her and stopped her cold. She had reached the flat rock, he wasn't far behind. She could have run on. She knew she could but she thought, what's the use, I already know he doesn't love me. Her lungs ached as she sank onto the rock from gasping in the wet air.

Dave rounded the corner at a run, his drenched beard and hair dripping, his brow set in worried wrinkles that showed all of his thirty years. He sat beside her, breathing hard as he studied her frightened eyes, which were searching his face timidly.

"Why did you run? Did the cave scare you?"

"No. You did. Before."

He averted his eyes. "Oh."

Thunder rolled in the distance and Dave shifted his body uneasily. After a long pause he said, "Elly, you don't understand. It's not that I don't love you, but this whole relationship is sinful, damned from the beginning."

His voice was trembling, higher than usual and his hand shook as he palmed the moisture off his face. Elly narrowed her eyes, amazed by the drastic change in his face.

"Sinful?" she asked softly.

"Yes." He turned his eyes on her again. "I'm a Christian now, praise the Lord. I was baptized the other night. If He can forgive me, I hope you can."

Elly's jaw dropped. Her immediate impulse was to laugh, but Jed's face was deadly serious, his gaze clear and steady. All she could say was, "Forgive you for what?"

"I did it, to Jed. I cut him up." He went on quickly, before she had time to respond, the words pouring out like a solemn confession. "Jed went down to Mexico for a few weeks and while he was gone this woman I was seeing moved in with me. We dropped some acid the day he got back and everything got blown out of proportion. The woman, she didn't want Jed to stay. She got really upset, kept yelling at me to get him out. I went in the kitchen and told him to leave, but he was broke and had no place to go. He said he'd split when he could, but I wanted him out then, that night. I pulled a big knife out of the drawer and backed him up against the wall, waving it in his face, telling him I'd kill him if he didn't leave. Jed panicked and grabbed hold of the blade."

Dave's voice cracked. He started crying, but went on in a halting voice.

"It was so stupid. When I jerked the knife away blood started pouring out of his hand. I was sorry the minute I did it. I tried to make it stop by running cold water on it, like it was nothing bad. I was too screwed up to do

anything right. Jed wrapped a t-shirt around his hand and left. He hasn't even looked at me since. I'm sorry, Elly, God help me, I am."

Elly was numb to the huge drops of rain that bombarded them. She regarded Dave's slumped body with a blank stare, all the strange silences and happenings of that day pulling together in her mind to make some vague sense. But she felt nothing. The answers to her old questions gave way to new questions that she had no strength to ask. Forgive? There was nothing to forgive. Jed was healed, happier than ever, and Dave was miserable, screwing his life and hers up over nothing. She pulled back the wet mop of hair that clung to her neck and closed her eyes against the rain. She saw Dave swaggering toward her with a big grin, the stare blinking over his shoulder as he lingered on top of her after making love, his handsome head tossed back with laughter all flash through her mind and drift away in the splatter of rain.

He was muttering. Praying, she realized, and opened her eyes. The sight of his bowed sopping head enraged her. She reached out and grabbed hold of his hair, snatching it back with a jerk.

"Stop it," she hissed. "Just knock it off and look at me."

The surprise in his expression melted into the old dull-eyed sadness and set Elly to trembling angrily as she glared down her nose at him.

"I forgive you," she said flatly. "Jed forgives you. The whole goddam world forgives you, so just stop acting like an ass, okay? Let's get out of the rain."

She stood and stomped a few feet away. When she looked back, Dave was slowly rising to his feet, his face still sunken all the way to the car until Elly asked him for the keys and he handed them over.

"I'd hate to trust God to drive us home," she said. "Since He sent this stupid storm in the first place."

"Don't, Elly. You don't know what you're saying. He protects you whether you want Him to or not." Dave reached out to touch her shoulder, but she drew it away with steely blue eyes. "Praise the Lord," he sighed. "You're just like those poor fish."

Elly groaned and got in the car. She rolled a joint and Dave made no comment. She smiled inwardly at the fact he couldn't roll down the window because of the Lord's rain and tested the speed limit all the way back to Highland.

"See you later," was all she said when she dropped him off.

A week passed with Elly thinking, surely I'll run into Dave around town some place, but he never appeared at any of their usual haunts. She began to worry about him and feel guilty for coming down on him so hard. She asked a few people if they'd seen him, but nobody had.

Fall classes started on a stifling hot day and Elly

walked toward the book store feeling like she'd melt into the pavement if she didn't get hold of a Dr. Pepper soon. As she came around the side of Parsons Hall she encountered a small crowd gathered on the corner in front of the book store, which wasn't unusual, but enough to arouse her curiosity. Some of the people on the fringes were breaking away and coming toward, shaking their heads and laughing. A few guys were shouting out unintelligible jeers at a man in a black suit who was perched on top of the stone wall, waving a Bible high over his head.

"God loves marijuana," someone yelled from the crowd.

Elly giggled, then halted abruptly. His hair was clipped, but it was Dave. She wiped the moisture from her eyes and turned into the alley.

The Seduction of Slim

Annie wanted out. It had been Huntley's big idea to get Slim layed, and she figured she'd done her part collecting the money. Fifty-three bucks altogether. Annie was amazed that so many people in Highland would pitch in to buy a whore for a loser like Slim, but they were even excited about it. Slim's seduction party was going to be the gala event of the season. Huntley didn't have any trouble finding a whore who'd take that kind of money for a trick, but Annie felt like a traitor to her sex. After all, she thought, whores are women, too.

Annie groaned as she stared into her closet. The whole thing was turning into a mean joke, a circus, as far as she was concerned. Combo and Dudley had gone to the Goodwill and bought tuxedos and top hats. Mona said she was going as a fertility goddess, and Huntley was so excited about the response to his plans to redeem Slim he couldn't talk about anything else. One good fuck, he said, one good fuck and Slim will be a changed man. Annie doubted his theory. Just like Huntley, Highland's only forty-year-old bald hippie, and and Shell-shocked Joe, who wandered Wabash Avenue cussing out parking meters, Slim and his polaroid would always be there. Annie gave the closet door a shove

and snatched Stranger in a Strange Land off the bedside table. She stretched out on the living room floor, hoping the remaining half of the book would take her mind off the affair until the festivities were over. The knock on her door interrupted her in the middle of the first sentence.

"Who is it?" she called.

"Your escorts, Madam," came the reply. "We've come to take you to the ball, so to speak."

Annie recognized Combo's voice and opened the door. She burst out laughing. Combo and Dudley stood before her stiff as statues, holding their crumpled top hats in the crooks of their arms. Combo's frizzy hair balled out five inches around his head as usual, and Dudley had replaced his marijuana leaf earring with a glittering dime store diamond.

"You're not dressed," Combo frowned. "Get a move on, Annie. We're late already."

Dudley drew a bouquet of plastic daffodils from behind his back. "Here," he said. "Huntley sent you these."

Annie sobered, taking the bouquet with a grimace. "I'm not going," she said. "Tell Huntley I said thanks."

Combo and Dudley frowned at one another, then tossed their hats on the floor. "We were warned of that eventuality," said Combo, gripping her firmly by the arm. Dudley took her other arm and said, "And we were told not to take no for an answer." They lifted her easily and set her down in the bedroom, then ducked out and pulled the door shut in

in the bedroom, then ducked out and pulled the door shut in her face.

"But I really don't want to go," she whined.

"Nonsense, bullshit, and get dressed," yelled Combo. "You better come out in ten minutes lookin' good enough to eat."

Annie looked down at the bouquet, cursing Huntley under her breath. She knew they weren't kidding. They were old townies like her, and just as stubborn. Besides, they had the muscle to carry her wherever they pleased. She reared her arm back and smacked the stiff daffodils against the door. "No," she said. "It's sick. It's a sick stupid joke on Slim and I don't want to watch you all laughing. That whore'll probably throw up the minute she sees him. Nobody's even warned her about him, have they?"

"Temper, temper," urged Combo.

"We like Slim, Annie," Dudley insisted. "We're helpin' the dude out. The girl, too. They're both gettin' what they want and nobody's gettin' hurt."

Annie snorted.

"Look," Combo reasoned. "Huntley knows how you feel and he says you should come and talk to the girl, warn her yourself if you want. Will you come for that at least? She can back out if she wants, okay?"

"Last time I suggested that, Huntley said Highland's whores were famous for their iron stomachs," Annie replied.

She heard them chuckling and frowned angrily at the door, but it occurred to her this might be her chance to stop the whole mess.

"All right," she said, yanking off her t-shirt. "I'll go talk to her, but it may just ruin your party." She dropped her jeans and kicked them into the corner on her way to the closet.

As they rounded the last corner on their way to the Little Slipper Tavern, it looked as if the entire long-haired population of Highland had turned out, in their brightest colors and fanciest patched jeans. They were spilling onto the sidewalk through the hole in front that should have been a window, passing bottles and joints freely in and out. The Slipper's hole was created when a car crashed through the front on the first day of Spring. By the time the owner got the money together to replace it, all the regulars were so used to climbing in and out of it they raised a fuss, so the owner decided to leave it alone until the weather turned cold.

"We told Slim it was a Eugene V. Debs Day celebration," Dudley told her. "Time for all us underdogs to get drunk and crazy."

"Brilliant," said Annie. "You sure he's not suspicious?"

"Hell, no," Combo scoffed. "Eugene V. is one of Slim's heroes. He organized the railroaders, dontcha know?"

Annie laughed. Next to sneaking pictures of girls in bars, Slim's biggest passion was the railroad. He drove a cab for a living, but he spent a lot of time hanging around the station yard to snap photos and talk to the crew. She spotted his red and white polka dot railroader cap right away, towering high above the heads in the crowd.

Slim saw the three of them, too, and raised a spidery arm high in the air with a pitcher of beer sloshing around at its end. "Howdy!" he called, pushing people out of the way as he moved toward them. He tottered back and forth as if the wind were pretty strong at seven feet. There seemed to be no end to the directions his bones could swivel in their sockets. Annie stifled a giggle. From where she stood looking up, it looked like the ball of his drooping nose rested on the tip of his ragged chin. His drunken grin was hidden in the shadow between them.

"Hi Slim," she said. "What's up?"

"Pictures, pictures," Slim replied, shoving his pitcher at Dudley. He tilted back on the heels of his shining patent leather loafers and pulled a Kodak packet from his pocket. "In Eugene's honor I went down an' took these. Wrote a new poem, too, on the back of one of 'em." He sorted through a stack three inches thick, chuckling to himself, glancing slyly at Annie over the rim of his glasses. "Mosta these is my horney pictures," he whispered hoarsely. "Can't show 'em to a lady."

disgust. Combo and Dudley pressed against Slim and tittered over the pictures. She examined Slim's outfit and sighed, thinking he looked like a peacock with bad taste. He wore a bright pink shirt and greenish plaid double-knit bell bottoms. The cuffs of his pants ended several inches above his shoes and a strip of hairy leg showed where his socks had crumpled down around his ankles.

"Here it is," Slim said. He handed her a picture of an empty box car with the doors open and the train station visible behind it. Annie had seen dozens like it come out of Slim's pocket. She turned it over and read:

Railroad Poem #107

Empty box cars, ringing rails
Rusted spikes and flattened nails.
Gravel crunches beneath my boot,
I'd go where they've been
If I could.

"That's nice Slim," she said, passing it on. She had to admit it was one of his better efforts, and she certainly couldn't argue with his wish that a train carry him far, far away. But she knew Highland was the perfect place for a man of Slim's passions, complete with a new crop of young coeds every Fall and criss-crossed with so many railroad tracks a person couldn't cross town without watching one or two rumble by.

"Hey, Annie," Huntley yelled. He had his head poked through the Slipper's hole.

"Hello, Mr. Huntley," she said. "Thanks for the

"Hello, Mr. Huntley," she said. "Thanks for the flowers."

"Anytime," he smiled. "You look stunning."

"What else?" Annie shrugged. "I came to talk to the girl, Huntley. Combo promised."

Huntley flicked the brim of her hat with his chubby finger. "Done," he said. "But I'm disappointed. I thought maybe you came to dance with me."

Annie scowled. Any other time she would have played along with his flirtation, but now it struck her as another part of the lude scheme. "Dream on, Huntley," she said.

Huntley swiped his hand over his bald crown and smiled. "You don't know what you're missing," he said.

"I'll wait by the side door," she said. "Tell the girl I want to talk to her, okay?"

She walked off without waiting for his reply. She was glad for the chance to get away from her excited friends, because their enthusiasm was seeping into her and she didn't like it. With them she'd smoked dope, eaten acid, and done a lot of crazy things, but she couldn't pretend to like Slim.

Huntley didn't take long getting around to the side door. The girl was younger than Annie expected, fair and freckled underneath teased blond hair and blue eyeshadow, with huge brown eyes and a completely sober expression.

"Annie, this is Carolyn," said Huntley.

"Hi," Carolyn replied. She was wearing a mini-skirt of purple velveteen and a silky green blouse. Annie tried to picture her in a meter maid's uniform, since that was the only way she'd ever seen a prostitute. The houses in town got busted traditionally around election time and, a few weeks later, all the girls who were busted showed up on the streets as meter maids. But Carolyn looked like any other little coed, except for lousy taste in clothes and too much make-up. At least, Annie thought, she and Slim could make a matched set.

"Huntley said you wanted to check me out or somethin'," said Carolyn. There was a testy edge to her voice.

Annie giggled nervously and shook her head. "Not exactly check you out," she said. "I just want to let you know what you're in for, that's all."

Carolyn raised her eyebrows, a slight smile parting her glossy pink lips. "I'm supposed to play like I'm a college chickie, and let some skinny dude take me home, right?" she asked.

"Right," Annie replied. "Only this guy isn't exactly ordinary. In fact he's--" She hesitated and looked at Huntley, hoping he might jump in with the right words, but he just stood there with a fat hairy hand covering his grin.

"Kinky," offered Carolyn.

"No, not that I know of," said Annie. "He's harmless

enough. He's just really ugly---and we're not sure he's ever had a girl before, you know?"

"A successful pick-up," Huntley corrected. "A girl he didn't have to buy."

"Yeah," Annie continued. "You might call him a technical virgin. I mean, he's thirty-three years old and he always carries this camera around sneaking pictures of girls. He's about seven feet tall, all bones, and his--"

Carolyn cut her off with a snort. "Thanks, Annie," she said. "But I didn't think he'd be a prize. Long as he's clean and I get the cash, I don't care if he's godzilla." She paused with a sigh. "If it worries you, Annie, I promise to keep my eyes closed," she said.

Huntley snickered and Annie felt her face going red. She was willing to admit he was right about Highland's famous whores without him gloating about it. Carolyn pulled the door open and caught Annie and Huntley in a sudden stream of light. "She your old lady Huntley?" Carolyn asked. Huntley shook his head and moved toward the door.

"Naw," Carolyn scoffed. "She won't let ya, will she, Huntley?"

Huntley glanced nervously at Annie, then he grabbed the door handle away from Carolyn. "Come on," he said. "That's got nothing to do with business." Carolyn didn't budge. She rolled her eyes slowly down to Annie's toes and back. Annie cringed.

"Maybe if you told her to keep her eyes closed she'd do it," Carolyn chuckled.

"Shut up," Annie hissed.

Carolyn raised her hands in mock surrender. "Easy, easy," she said. "I was just kiddin' around. I just read these things a little better than you hippie chicks, more experience, ya know?"

"Let's go, Carolyn," Huntley muttered. His hands were white as they gripped the door handle.

Annie shuddered angrily. "I'm not exactly a virgin!" she blurted.

Huntley groaned and lowered his eyes as Carolyn wheeled around and layed her crooked grin on Annie again. "You hippie chicks," she sneered. "It's chicks like you who keep me in business. You tease 'em, we please 'em." She passed inside.

Annie glared helplessly as her back disappeared into the crowd. Huntley placed one hesitant foot on the step, then withdrew it and let the door fall shut. "You going home?" he asked quietly. The dim streetlight flashed in her eyes as she looked at him.

"No," she said. "Hell no. I want to see my money at work. I'll go get Slim."

She coaxed Slim inside with the promise of a fresh pitcher. Bodies dipped and twisted all around them like fishes as they squeezed their way toward the bar. Annie ze-

roed in on Carolyn and Mona at a table along the side wall. Mona was wearing a flesh-colored leotard with balloons for breasts and a beach ball for a belly. Annie laughed, thinking: I hope the costume works.

"Sheeet," Slim drawled. "All this nice pussy runnin' around, and I cain't hardly even focus."

Annie stood between Slim and Huntley at the bar and downed two beers without a pause. She couldn't move one way or another without rubbing a butt or a shoulder, so she anchored herself to the bar and glided with the colliding bodies. Huntley kept their glasses full and carried on a shouting conversation with Slim. Annie laughed when it was called for, but avoided looking at either one. She ignored the tap on her shoulder, figuring it was just another misdirected hand, but the tap was repeated. She turned to find herself facing Carolyn's cocky grin.

"Hiya, Annie," Carolyn squealed. "How ya been?"

Annie's jaw snapped open, ready with a curse, but a glance at Slim cut the word off with a click in her throat. He twisted his head around looking for the source of the squeal. Annie recovered her smile in a hurry. "Carolyn," she smiled. "Long time no see."

"Yeah, I know," Carolyn replied. "You suppose I could get in here for a refill?"

Connie backed into Huntley as she stepped aside, and Carolyn scooted up beside Slim. Huntley threw one arm

around Annie's shoulders and raised the pitcher with the other.

"Here you go, Carolyn," he roared. "Fill 'er up right here. Any friend of Annie's has claim to this pitcher."

"That's right," Slim agreed. "Belly up." He turned sideways so the lens of his camera nearly bopped Carolyn in the nose. Her eyes grew wide as they rolled upward to take in his face.

"Oh, wow," she exclaimed. "You've got a camera. Is it loaded?"

Annie sank against Huntley, amazed. She's good, she thought, damn good. She believed anybody who could take a point blank look at Slim without flinching could take anything. Huntley gave her an excited hug.

"Sure it's loaded," Slim replied, giving the lens cover an affectionate pat. "Brand new roll of film."

"Well," Carolyn said, "will you take my picture?"

Slim stiffened in an attempt to stop weaving and blinked dazedly at Huntley and Annie. His mouth drooped open but no words came out. Carolyn giggled shyly. "That is," she said, "unless you're savin' it for somethin' else." "No, no," Slim stammered. "Carolyn, hey? I'll just do ya one better. This here's a polaroid, so I can give ya the picture in a few seconds. How's about that?"

Carolyn clapped her hands together. "Ooooo, that'd be

great," she squeaked.

Slim uncovered the lens and moved back a few paces, clearing a path as he went. He climbed up on a chair and fidgeted for a few seconds while Carolyn smoothed her hair and adjusted her smile.

"Nice going, Carolyn," Annie whispered. "You're a good actress."

"Thanks, Annie," Carolyn hissed. The flash exploded and she dropped her smile, looking hard at Annie. "But you're still a tight-assed little fool."

Every muscle in her tensed for a pounce, but Huntley's hand tightened on her shoulder. Slim returned to Carolyn's side, smiling proudly. "Easy, Annie," Huntley urged. "Don't blow it now." Annie glared at Carolyn's indifferent back, growling through her gritted teeth. "We're going to crank up the juke box," Huntley announced loudly. "Catch you two later."

"Ah-day-oss," Slim shouted. Carolyn wiggled her fingers in a wave. Huntley snatched Annie away by the wrist and headed for the back of the room. Annie balked several times, twisting against his grip on her. Finally Huntley halted and turned on her. "Will you relax?" he laughed. "Just enjoy the celebration. This is it, for chrissake."

"Damn her," Annie snapped. "I should've---you should've---Yeeow!" Combo had his fingers locked around her left bun.

"Honk, honk," he snorted, giving it a good squeeze.

"Did you say this is it?"

Huntley nodded and gave him the thumbs-up sign. Combo ignored Annie's indignant look and followed Huntley's pointed finger to the bar. "I'll pass the good word along," he said. He crouched down and plunged into the crowd, grabbing random tits and asses as he made his way.

"Come on, I've got us a ringside seat," Huntley said. He pulled Annie along to the juke box and lifted her on top, then scrambled up beside her. I fooled around and fell in love... buzzed beneath them. Annie squirmed reluctantly, but the increasing hum of voices and frantic collision of bodies held her fascinated. She resigned herself to watching the celebration. She spotted Dudley pulling a girl inside the jacket of his tux, slopping kisses on her neck as she laughed and he buttoned it up behind her. Annie giggled.

"Feeling better?" Huntley asked. She smiled and nodded. The temperature in the room was rising with the frenzy. Her skirt hung limp and wet between her legs and beads of sweat slung to the ends of Huntley's sideburns. She gave in to the music and rocked back and forth to the rhythm pounding beneath her. She felt relieved as she was sucked into the noise and movement that surrounded her. The Slipper felt like home again. She looked at the bar.

Carolyn had her arms around Slim's waist. She rubbed

her hips slowly across his crotch. Slim's lips had completely disappeared in ecstasy. His camera was slung behind his back to make room for Carolyn's tits against his stomach. He bent down and spoke into her ear. Carolyn nodded. He locked his arm around her and they headed for the door, Slim's camera bouncing up and down with the drunken swagger of his steps.

A shudder rushed through Annie as a cheer floated in through the Slipper's hole and was taken up by the inside crowd. She slipped her hand into Huntley's and looked at him. His smile was gone and his eyes were moist. Annie planted a triumphant kiss on his cheek. He gave her a curious look, then turned away.

"Hey," Annie whined. "What's the matter with you, Huntley? We did it."

"I cry when I'm happy," he replied sourly. "Okay, Annie? Do you mind?"

She backed away from the meanness in his voice, confused. Huntley with tears in his eyes just wasn't Huntley. His hand was a lifeless lump within hers and she didn't like it. It deadened the thrill inside her, left her empty in spite of the warm flush on her skin. She knew he was hurting inside and felt helpless to comfort him. She wanted to throw her arms around him and fix everything, but he was rigid, just as rigid as she'd always been with him. Impulsively she nuzzled her lips to his ear and whispered,

"Huntley, either I'm excited or I have to pee."

Huntley looked surprised, then grunted and took his hand away.

"Huntley, I'm serious," she said.

"So what do you want?" he asked flatly. "You want me to figure it out for you, or what?"

Annie dug her fingers into his sideburn and pulled him around to face her. "No. I want you to take me home and fuck me."

His face softened with a smile. "Not even make love?" he teased. She shook her head. He slid down off the juke box and held his arms out to her. Annie's feet never touched the floor. He heaved her over his shoulder and carried her home.

Museum Piece

For Sheila the world had soft edges, not by conscious choice, but by eyesight. The farther away the object from her point of view, the less rigid and sharp the cut of its lines. So when she visited the Art Institute in Chicago, it was the Impressionist room that held her in its pillow of pastels, in its seas and skies of running colors. She thought she would take Monet for a lover in her dreams, because he saw the world as she did, although she had no idea what he looked like and did not want to know. Not knowing, she could paint her own impression of him. She could dress herself in the long flowing dresses she knew would please him and he would take her down on velvet depths of grass where no twig would snap.

It was on a padded bench before a woman in just such a dress, half-hidden by a parasol, that Sheila sat fixed in her dream when the stranger approached her and sat, not too close but on the edge. She had not seen him watching, studying her like a piece of sculpture, walking profile to back to three-quarter in his fine Italian shoes and vested suit of ash gray. He was tall, very tall, with skin that might have been bathed in olive juice and hips so slender they seemed no more than an extension of his long gliding

legs. His black eyes shifted from the painting to Sheila's young face above a curling smile.

"Excuse me," he said in a smooth museum voice, "you would like to be this woman?"

All around her people babbled in Japanese, German, French, and assorted other languages, but somehow his voice pierced her dream like a pinpoint of light. Heavy-lidded and slow, her eyes drifted toward his face. Like another character in her dream, he was, floating, free and murmuring. Her body remained asleep; back curved, shoulders down, arms dangling between her legs and fingers barely touching the handles of her cloth bag, full of papers and books, on the floor. She turned her head, pausing for the words to gather the meaning.

"To be her...?" she asked herself, puzzled. "No," she answered. "No...to be there, where she is, maybe...but still be myself."

When she spoke to him, actually spoke, he took on face and form. Like an intruder he appeared suddenly, fully focused, before her eyes.

"I suppose this is what I mean," says the man. "You are so beautiful like this woman, so delicate like her."

Sheila's fair complexion flushes red and she thinks, Skinny...he means skinny...as her lips tighten in a doubtful, embarrassed smile. She lowers her eyes to his shoes, the leather so thin that the bends of his long toes bubble

its surface. She feels the straps of her own sandals binding her feet, the waistband of her jeans cutting a red line into her flesh, and the dimpled padding of the bench beneath her. She dares not look at his face.

"It is true blonds have more fun?" he asks playfully, just a hint of laughter behind the words.

She lifts her bag onto her thighs, which close to make a lap, and her arms close around the bag and press it to her breasts and belly. Go away, she wants to say, please, but doesn't, because he has done nothing really wrong. It is she who can't take a compliment with grace.

"No," she tells him, forcing a smile. "We just burn in the sun, that's all." She looks quickly at him, then away, longing for the peace she had a moment ago.

"I am from France," he says, "from the land of Monet. You are a student?"

She nods. The phrase tall dark stranger comes to mind and does not comfort her. Her eyes jump from stranger to stranger in the echoing room, pleadingly, as if to beg for interruption, for some distraction from the pull of his attention. The other visitors only glance at her, then at her stranger, and back to the paintings. She feels very much alone in his steady gaze.

"I am so sorry," he says, "my name is Paul Signet-Moran. And you are called...?"

"Sheila."

"Sheila," he says. "Will you take some coffee with me? Please?"

"No--thank you, no. I have to go home."

Looping her bag over her shoulder, she stands stiffly, tense, feeling her youth and frailty surround her like an egg shell. She trembles inside it.

He rises smoothly; sends a large bony hand toward her arm. Slender fingers snake around her wrist with gentle pressure.

"But you haven't seen the rest," he says. "We could walk together, after coffee."

"No," she says, yells, too loudly. People look at her, at him, then at the paintings. He removes his hand, laughing silently beneath his understanding smile.

"I have frightened you?" he asks.

She can't move; feels conspicuous. Overreacting...she thinks...he's being nice and I'm overreacting...calm down.

"No, thank you. I really do have to go. I don't want any coffee."

The lights seem to glare down at her now. Every word is amplified, too loud, bouncing off marble floors and walls. She wants to run, but can't seem to move. He holds her in his black eyes, full of humor and...concern? The slick shine of the room seems to warn her not to run; she might slip, fall and slide, her shirt riding up her back and her back burning with the friction. She would look a fool.

"Shee-laa," he croons, low and deep, not at all like the high sharp of her own voice. "Sit, please. Enjoy your Monet. I will not disturb you, if I may only watch your face...it is so fine...the bone...like cut glass."

"No," she hisses, anger in it. He lies, she thinks... the words are lies...and he is a lie. "Go away."

A guard approaches, middle-aged, round in his uniform, eyes dull from constant watching. "Is there a problem, folks?"

Paul Signet-Moran smiles, shrugs European-style, blameless and smooth. "Nothing wrong, Monsieur. The lady is a bit upset...tired from walking, you see?"

The guard smiles at Sheila's trembling face. She's seventeen if a day, he thinks; in over her head with this guy, but what the hell? Kids. "Well," he says, "you'll have to keep it down--disturbing the others. There's a nice coffee shop if you need a rest. It's a big museum. Hard to see it all in one day."

"But," Sheila objects, "we're not together. I don't even know him. I just want to look. Alone." She sprays hateful eyes over Paul Signet-Moran's grinning face, feeling stronger in her anger, with the guard there. She looks at the guard; he is frowning at her. Others are looking. It's a scene. The paintings stand ignored. Some move through the archway, into the next gallery, into peace.

"Look," the guard reasons, "you'll have to move on."

If you want to be alone, then go be alone, but please don't ruin the day for others."

Graciously, with a slight inclination of body that is almost a bow, Paul Signet-Moran obliges the guard, passes under the archway, gliding with the crowd. Sheila glares at his back until his ash gray suit blends with the rest and is gone.

"Happy now?" asks the guard, turning away, not waiting for an answer, returning to his post at the door.

Sheila isn't happy. She doesn't know what she is, but the feeling isn't good. Her eyes roam the paintings, but none of them invites her closer. All seem mere blobs of colors, unreal and somewhat sad with their blurred lines and timid hues. Their colors run as her blood runs. The crowd swims around her, splitting like water around a rock, around Sheila, sunk in her bed of sand and bleeding from a wound nobody sees. But she is bleeding; the wound hurts. She hugs her bag tightly beneath her arm, turns, moves with the crowd, eyes on the floor, as if the strength draining from her might leave a trail of blood on the echoing floor.

I'm Okay, You're Psychotic

It's a rare day in February. The sun emerges and gives me taste of what I've longed for under all these months of gray and white. I know it won't last, but I'm drunk on the illusion. I occupy a bench beside the campus green and give my dimples generously to people who have none.

He is a man without a smile. I give him mine, then look away. I look away because he doesn't. Usually the gesture is enough, but he approaches; asks for a match.

His eyes are green and full of compliments, but they aren't the first thing I notice. Beneath his beard his face is scarred and his nose is crooked from some past injury. I'm willing to ignore these small details. When a man plucks me out of a crowd, I'm too flattered to turn away.

"I'm depressed," he says. It seems a female German professor has sabotaged his four-O with a B.

With a toss of my hair I say, "So what? You have the sunshine and a pretty girl beside you--you have no excuse."

He laughs. I feel my power.

"You take yourself too seriously," I tell him.

He shrugs and says, "I'm tired of being alone."

I sell myself for an ice cream cone and a stroll on

the bridge. He has uncommon answers for my common questions. Where from? Everywhere. Where to? Medical school, Germany. He was a child prodigy, went to a military academy, ran away, lived with Navajos, had a wife and son who were killed in a car crash. He limps because a bullet knocked him off a cliff in Viet Nam.

"Bullshit," I say.

"It's the truth," he swears. "If you can't handle it, it's your own fault. I've never met anyone who lived a life like mine."

His eyes are intense. They dare me and I accept. I must admit I grew up in the midwest middle class where such things happen only in the movies.

He points to the rocks along the bank. "I'd like to get a bottle of whiskey and sit down there," he says.

"No, I don't want to do that," I tell him. "I don't like whiskey."

"Who asked you?" he demands.

It's embarrassing. "Touche," I say.

"Don't ever assume you know what I'm thinking. If you want to know, ask."

In the car he turns the stereo up louder than I can talk. Classical music in a souped-up Bronco. I roll down my window and let the wind cut through the sound, drowning in this odd mixture of man and light and music. Somehow his story is no harder to believe than a Spring day in February,

but I withhold my sympathy until I see some proof. His speed frightens me, but I close my eyes and say nothing. He wants me; it's enough. He takes me home and never lets me go.

His house is full of plants. No furniture, only plants that outgrow their shelves and vie for shades of green I've never seen before. Mine wither at the edges from neglect.

"I'm not always this happy," I confess. "Some nights I can't sleep because I worry."

When his fingers brush my cheek I pull away.

"You've been hurt," he says. "You're holding back, but I won't let you shut me out."

There are deep scars on his leg. Pictures, tapes, evidence of his victories all round. My doubts leave me feeling guilty. His wallet unfolds greener than mine. Women have posed nude before his camera. A box is stuffed with letters wearing foreign stamps; a father in Switzerland, a mother in England, a friend in Wales. German rolls off his tongue as if it were born there. I mutter an apology. He plays Spanish on his guitar and praises my voice when I sing.

It is a crumb from a cake that, he assures me, is hidden behind love. There is no laughter in his eyes and I believe him. For another taste I must only surrender my smile. A sign on his wall says "He is free who dares to go

to the end of his thought." I stay, because the friend in Wales seems to be the only one who dares.

While I wash his dishes he presses a hard promise against me and I smile. I watch him tend his plants. He carries a syringe and shoots them full of vitamins and insecticide. I watch him steal my cigarettes one by one. I even empty the ashtrays; serve him brimming cups of coffee without spilling a single drop on an important paper. He doesn't notice. These favors he expects. He calls me Babe and I obey. I beg for crumbs.

"Did you really only want a match that day?" I ask.

"Yes," he says. He never plays my games. The truth, he says, is absolute. His account of me is always balanced. He says I walk like an elephant, but I have worlds in my face. I may not have the only red star in his address book, but I have the biggest. I may not be his perfect woman, but I have amazing potential.

"You must be strong," he says, " before you can be gentle. You don't like yourself the way you are. Look at all the men who've left you."

My tears drop on the mirror he holds before me. I admit I have not always been truthful, or generous, or fair. I see myself growing old alone. I see myself naked, hiding from battles I should be fighting. I am still the world's baby sister. I trust, I pretend, I laugh, and I cry when I hurt. That's all. Is it enough?

No. I promise to be harder on myself.

My friends can't stand him. He shows them his scars and boasts of his accomplishments and, one by one, they leave the room. They ask me why I stay.

"Because he's different," I tell them, "he has no friends. He only shows me my weaknesses so I can turn them into strengths."

They shake their heads. They say I shouldn't listen.

"They aren't your friends, he says. "They only tell you what you want to hear, not the truth. You can go anytime--but if you do, you'll have to live with knowing you have failed. I offer you a closeness you've never known before and you resist me."

I promise to try harder.

He says I must give up my lies and petty fantasies; he warns that children like me are eaten alive out there, that my defenses are mere illusion, that my love is only blind and selfish.

"You're psychotic," he says. "You delude yourself."

I agree. In his house the world is a serious place, a place to be looted and burned before it burns you. He must have the answers, this man who never cries. I think a person must laugh before he can cry, but I begin to wonder if I laugh too much. There is fear in my voice when I agree.

In bed he tells me he has outgrown his flesh. "You won't let me close to you intellectually, emotionally,

spiritually," he accuses. "You must wait."

In the morning I cook his eggs, serve his coffee, promise to be good while he is gone. Good means thinking, seeing, analyzing till it hurts. Though I sleep well these nights beside him, I wonder if I'm only hiding in those dreams I can't remember. I miss my friends. I fear I can't remember the promises I've made, much less keep them, but I do what can. I wash the dishes, make the bed, thaw some meat for supper. I think that, if he would only laugh, everything would be all right. While he's away, my resistance grows. When he returns we battle with words; he always wins.

"You demand too much of me," I say.

"You demand too little of yourself," he says.

I break my promises without knowing, until his anger breaks. I lie to get away to a party, a celebration of nonsense and foolish laughter I have missed.

He knows I lie. He threatens to have me busted; to reduce all I own to a pile of rubble if I leave the house. He gives me my first manmade bruises. His anger holds me captive and my guilt surrounds me. I curl up on my bed and cry. I don't know what this man wants, but I curl around myself and hold on tight. He won't take kindnesses or thanks, only my complete surrender. I hold onto all those faults and fallacies that keep him from my heart. I wrap my arms around them and I cry.

It leaves me weak. The bruises darken. I am docile, tender, supple as his hands. There is no place to run. I know that he is leaving soon, to Germany, out of my life, and so I wait. I wait on him. I wait on every sunset, watch for any flash of anger in his eyes. And when he says he'll send for me, I only smile.

The Eggs

He likes three eggs, soft-boiled. It's late afternoon and he's hungry. He would prefer meat, but I've been writing and have forgotten to lay steaks out to thaw. In an irritated voice he tells me, "Go on working. I'll cook them myself."

There is a system for cooking his eggs that one must follow precisely, or he will taste the difference. Too much water is wasteful and too little will crack the shells, so their white curves must peep through the surface like bubbles. BRING WATER TO RAPID BOIL (I can feel his eyes on me from where he leans against the stove...I know I am being punished...eggs instead of steak...he's making a great sacrifice for my forgetfulness...) TURN OFF HEAT. SET TIMER FOR FOUR MINUTES, THREE FOR SMALLER EGGS (I bought small eggs...they were cheaper...he sighs a heavy sigh) I hear the timer click into place and he comes to the desk. He reaches for his Blue Book of phone numbers and makes a call.

I don't know who he's calling, but the soft and coaxing voice tells me the receiver is female. He makes at least ten calls every day, so I know his voices well. His calls fall into three categories: Persuasion, Advice, and Seduction. This is Persuasion. He tells the receiver she

would benefit immeasurably from studying Spanish with him, but I know it is he who is sweating in Spanish. I have heard him tell operators in distant cities that they should quit their mundane jobs and come to see him, all the while watching my reaction, looking for signs of jealousy or pain, because mature and educated women should be above such pettiness. So I go on typing while the pain runs down my throat and curdles in my belly.

The buzzer sounds. WHEN BUZZER SOUNDS, EMPTY HOT WATER AND RUN COLD WATER OVER THE EGGS...(If you don't do this they will go on cooking in their shells).

He talks. The timer buzzes. I hate that electric sound as much as I hate alarm clocks. I try to ignore both their voices, and in this moment I hate him as much as I hate the buzzer. I am determined that he will finish cooking his own eggs, but he doesn't seem to hear. He is sitting right beside me and does not hear.

I rise, turn the buzzer off, and return to the desk.

When he hangs up he goes to the stove. With a jerk he snatches the pan from the stove and reels to face me.

"Why the hell didn't you take these off? Or at least tell me they were done?"

"That buzzer is loud enough to hear next door."

"They'll be hard-boiled now."

"So you'll have hard instead of soft. Big deal."

"You did it on purpose," he yells over running water.

"I can't trust you to do anything right."

He's cracking the shells, hissing angrily as his fingers feel the heat. Are all his noises particularly loud, or am I imagining things? I pause to read what I've written. It's gibberish.

"Why did you do that?" he demands.

"If you're going to cook something it's your responsibility, not mine."

He appears in the doorway, holding a bowl of steaming eggs. "But it's your responsibility to turn the buzzer off? Is that it? You butt into my business as far as it pleases you, but when it comes to taking the blame for screwing things up you don't want any part of it."

"You're overreacting a little, aren't you?"

"No. I don't think I am. I think you did something deliberately mean and sneaky and you want me to let you get away with it."

I don't know what to say to this. I find myself wondering if it's true. Did I act out of jealousy? Out of spite? Because he was talking to a woman instead of reading a book or watching T.V., did I deliberately destroy his eggs? I was annoyed, yes, and frustrated by all the distractions from my work, but maybe....I'm not sure. All I have is a feeling that I've done nothing wrong. I would like to defend myself, but on what grounds, I don't know. Reason doesn't seem to be working.

"How could I be sneaky?" I ask. "You were sitting right beside me."

"I listen when someone is talking to me," he reminds me. "I shut everything else out and concentrate--but you wouldn't understand that, would you?"

"Would you like me to cook you some soft eggs?" I ask, giving up. "Would you leave me alone then?"

"Yes, I would," he says, coming toward me. "But first I want you to eat these."

He shoves the bowl between my nose and the typewriter. I don't believe he's serious, so I laugh.

"I mean it," he says. "If you don't eat these eggs, you'll never eat anything in my house again."

He slams the bowl down on the table beside me, glaring down on my face with an anger I've never seen in him before. I can't believe this is happening, but my fear tells me that it is. Suddenly my love and respect for this man has turned to fear. It makes no sense, yet he is serious. This man who has said he loves me wants me to swallow my pride over five minutes' time and three small eggs. He folds his arms across his chest and waits.

"No," I say. "I don't want them. Eat your own mistakes."

"It's a symbolic act," he says, his voice reasonable now, smooth with wisdom and logic. "You're the one who's always complaining about the little games women play; the

way they play cute and dumb to get out of things. The only way I can be sure you know how low you've stooped is if you eat these eggs."

"I'm sorry," I say, though I don't know why, except to return to peace, to get him off my back.

"Sorry doesn't mean shit," he declares. "Women always say that and never mean it. Prove it. Show me."

He turns toward the kitchen, stops a few feet away and turns to face me again. This time his eyes have gone soft, a bit sad, and he says, "If you don't eat them, you can move out today. I can't love if I can't trust."

He leaves me staring at the bowl of eggs. I know he means what he says. I knew when I turned off the buzzer that the eggs would be ruined and he would be angry, so why did I do it? Had I asked for this? I wasn't thinking. He's always saying that I don't think before I act and these eggs seem proof of that. I want peace. I want his love, because when he gives it, it is like no other. He seems to know me better than I know myself.

I cut through one of the eggs and spoon a bite into my mouth. It's cold and rubber, but I chew. He's watching me and smiling. I can't look at him, but I can feel his smile. After the third bite he comes to me and takes the bowl from my hands. He pulls me to my feet and holds me close. When he kisses my face, he kisses tears.

"I love you," he says. "I'm proud of you. I only did

it because I want you to be as good as you can be."

"I know," I say. "I know."

"Go back to work now," he says. "I'll cook my own eggs."

Red Stars

One evening he opens the door to a blonde, junior petite, smiling coed with a German book in her arm. I say hello.

He says, "This is Debby. I'm going to help her with her German."

I'm not surprised. Debby has been preceeded by Beth, who needed advice about a carburetor, and Connie, who was getting better grades in Genetics. They take seats at the picnic table (his desk) and I return to reading Catch-22 for the second time. Though I stifle some amusement, a few laughs bubble out, cut off by simmering looks from him. I apologize, but I'm into the chapter about the soldier who saw everything twice and it is impossible to comprehend fully without laughing aloud.

"That does it," he says. "I can see we'll have to move into the bedroom."

Debby looks at me as if I might throw my book at her, but I'm only smiling. She's the one who doesn't know about Beth and Connie, not I. Besides, she's so cute, she's too cute. Instead of jealousy I'm filled with amused objectivity, watching him flirt, compliment, instruct in his lowest, most seductive voice. Debby is skirting my territory and

she knows it. My clothes are in a pile in the corner of the bedroom and my toothbrush is on the counter next to his. The situation needs no comment from me, only my presence.

One hour passes. I boil water for coffee and wash the supper dishes. From the bedroom comes muffled conversation that could be any language, interrupted by female giggles. Cute. I'm ready to start a new chapter but I'm not sure I want to do that yet. Sometimes I like to let what I've read sink in for awhile before beginning again. I decide to write some letters.

Two hours, two letters later. Silence in the bedroom. The legal pad I brought with me is empty and I begin a search for paper. Although his desk is littered with papers, none of them are clean, so I spot a Blue Book in between some textbooks and pull it out. Where there's a notebook, I decide, there is paper.

I admit I might have turned directly to the back and ripped out a sheet, but first I check to see what sort of document I'm robbing. It's an address and phone number collection. All the names are female, some are noted with stars in red ink. My name is there and my star is the biggest. My star is so big that its points obscure the first letters of the names above and below it. But my name is followed only by a phone number, others have comments like "Spanish class--nice legs" and "Genetics--seems intelligent". It has the same effect on me as Catch-22, I

can't put it down.

Muffled voices from the bedroom.

I notice that the blue book contains a section for each quarter of school, and that the Fall and Winter quarters have checkmarks, dates, meeting places beside some of the names. A few have been penciled out completely. I recall the deep discussions we've had about rising above lust to find real love; about looking beyond appearances to see what makes a person tick. I'm so pleased with my discovery that I decide to keep it to myself. I know it's unfair to withhold such information for use as a secret weapon, but then, what does fair and unfair have to do with it anymore? I rip out a clean sheet of paper and begin another letter.

Dear Jean,

What does it mean when you have the biggest red star...?

Another hour. It's nearing one o'clock when the door opens. Debby takes the long evasive route to retrieve her purse and he walks her to the front door. When he returns to the living room, I'm still absorbed in my letter. He approaches from behind and curls his arms around my neck, lips to my ear.

"What are you writing?"

"A letter."

"I hope you're not mad."

"Nope, I've been keeping busy."

"Good. I didn't know it would take so long."

He pulls away, begins pacing among the potted plants. One hand tugs at the tip of his beard as he walks to the window and back. Finally he stops beside me, says, "Are you about finished? I want to talk about this."

"Go ahead," I say. "I can finish this later."

He takes up pacing again and I turn to watch. It's all I can do to hold the laughter down I mean, here we are again back to honesty and openness in a late night heart-to-heart. I'm sure he's interpreting my smile as suppressed jealousy jealousy and the irony of it lifts me even farther into my detached state. I want to play this scene for all it's worth.

"What's the matter?" I ask him. "Debby get you all worked up?"

He halts, grinning. "Man, she is so hot for my body-- I touched her hand once and I thought she was going through the ceiling."

"So why didn't you screw her?"

He looks surprised, says, "Well, I wanted to, but I didn't know how you'd take it. If you hadn't been here I would have, but I didn't want to hurt you."

"I'm glad you didn't. I'm trying to overcome jealousy, but that might have been a bit much."

He nods. "She needs it though. Poor kid, all she ever goes out with is football players, she needs somebody

to do it to her right."

"And you think you could teach her a few things."

I feel evil. For two months I've slept with this man and listened to his philosophies on lovemaking vs. spiritual lovemaking without experiencing much of either. I see his hard-on and wonder if he ever gets turned on by anyone but himself.

"You know what would really be neat--for you especially," he says. "Some night I could go over to her house and get all worked up, then come back here and give you the benefits."

"No thanks." Now I'm hurt. Now were back to deficiencies of my body. He won't let it go.

"I guess that wouldn't be so neat for you, would it?" he concedes.

"No, it would be mean."

He shrugs. "It wouldn't be mean, really. You, women, couldn't handle it, but if you were as free sexually as I am the three of us could have a great time together."

"The best would be a harem," I tell him. "Just think, you could have five or six women to yourself."

"Would you be in it?"

"No."

He laughs, comes to me. With his hands on my shoulders he plants a kiss on my cheek and says, "You know, the woman who's free with me is the one who has me. My wife

was really free with me."

I think he's lucky his wife died when she did, but I'm smiling. "It goes both ways, you know," I say. "I think you should screw her if you really want to."

"I'm thinking about it."

We go to bed and I hear him fall asleep. For the first time I'm glad he doesn't reach for me. It's funny, playing this game we're in and I love the intrigue. As long as there's no danger of falling in love with such a man I see no reason why I shouldn't stay on this roller coaster, at least until something better comes along. His feelings don't matter anymore. I have no wish to hurt him deliberately, but I'm too curious to leave before the game is over.

The Dance

I miss my friends. I never officially moved into his house, which is a few miles out of town, but I am living there. The life I had at my apartment no longer exists. I see no one but him unless I make a special effort to do so. He doesn't like me to see my friends, especially Susan, because he says I come back cocky and self-righteous. There is poisoning going on, but I'm no longer sure from whose bottle. Susan met him one night at a party at her house.

We were singing, playing harmonicas, kazoes, guitars, or anything that made a noise. There were fifteen or so people scattered around the room in a ragged circle. He came in and clung to my side like a small boy confronted with strangers who treated him like everyone else. His hands shook (from too much coffee he said) and he appeared fascinated and frightened in the noisy roomful. I coaxed him into finding a guitar, joining us all. When he did it seemed to give him the confidence he lacked, but it expressed itself strangely.

"Do you know this one?" he asked the nearest player. He strummed out a few chords, winced, adjusted his fingering and strummed again; his hands still shaking. The player sat with his harmonica poised near his lips; shook his head

apologetically. Whatever the song was, it sounded awful, arrhythmic. He offered another, equally as bad.

"No, I'm sorry," said the harmonica player.

"Well, how about this?" he said, taking a new chord.

Same result. I couldn't understand what was wrong: I'd heard him play many times, excellently, even picking up songs that I sang through only once. His nervousness took his hands, but he wouldn't give up. The others picked their way slowly into a simple blues number and he barged in with disrupting intensity. Susan looked at me curiously, as if to say, "This is him?" and I was embarrassed. But we stayed until everyone else had left; I with the vague hope that he would magically fit in with the rest and the good times would resume. It never happened.

Later, with Susan, I hinted that it's time we go, but he is too busy belting songs in a smokey, gravelled voice. Susan suggests a game of Scrabble.

"Uh, no," I said. She looks as if she can't believe her ears; I never refuse that game. But he and I have played before and I know what will happen. He refuses to accept defeat, so he takes half-an-hour, forty-five minutes rifling through the dictionary at a turn, only to come up with something Egyptian or Persian that no one else has ever heard of. He calls it a learning experience. I know Susan will never buy that because she and I pride ourselves on playing fast, high-scoring games with the vocabularies in

our heads.

"Why not?" he asks me. "I'd like to play."

"Yeah, why not?" Susan wants to know.

"Because...he plays the long way," I say with a laugh.

The look he gives me is a warning. We've stopped playing Scrabble together because of the arguments that end our games. I don't like his rules and he doesn't like my complaining.

"Well," Susan says, "in that case, I'm going to bed."

On the street outside the house I tell him I'm going home to my house. It's early in the morning, no traffic, no lights but the pools on the pavement. He stands holding the door of my car open, looking hurt.

"Why? I thought you'd want to be with me," he says.

"Because I'm tired and I want to sleep in my own bed, alone."

"Why?"

"Because I do, that's all."

"Well, I want to be with you."

"Look, I'll see you tomorrow. Tonight I want to be alone."

He looks away, regrouping his thoughts. Wanting or not wanting to do something is never reason enough for him, unless the wants are his.

"You weren't very supportive in there," he says. "I

expected more loyalty from you than that."

"What are you talking about?"

"Telling Susan I take a long time at Scrabble. What else have you told her about me behind my back?"

"Nothing I haven't told you to your face."

His eyes return, glaring green in the streetlight.

"You're lying. I could feel it when I walked into the room. Lots of people in there had a preconceived notion of me that they could only have gotten from you."

"That's not true. Sure I've told pople about you, but they were willing to accept you tonight. You do it to yourself--you insist on being different so much that everbody treats you that way. It's not my fault."

If you talk about me at all it's your fault. Nobody knows me better than I know myself. Anything you say is distorted."

He slams the door, leans in the window. "Go on home. I'll see you tomorrow, " he says.

"You want to leave it like this?" I ask. "You go home mad and I go home confused and tomorrow we pretend like it's all okay."

"It's what you want," he shrugs. "Not me."

I want to be away from him; I need to, so I go. There are fresh sundried sheets on my bed that I haven't had the pleasure of burying my face in yet. I won't have to lie awake wondering why he doesn't touch me, feeling ugly and

unwanted. I can stretch out without colliding into him or the wall. These reasons he would never understand or accept; he would call them excuses, not reasons.

At 7:30 in the morning the phone rings.

"Good morning," he says. "I missed you last night."

Yawning I say, "I'm still asleep."

"I love you," he says. "Go back to bed, I'll see you later."

Boxes

Two weeks before he is to leave, he moves out of his apartment and into mine. I've offered this arrangement weeks before, when it seemed easy and convenient, but now I wish there were some way to escape it. If I loved him I know the mountain of boxes and pile of clothes in my living room would be a joke instead of an eyesore. I have to ask him to clear a path so I can walk from the dining room to the front door. He has a cold, thanks to me, and so does my friend Jim. He is an intruder, a violator of my personal space, right down to the wads of kleenex in my ashtrays.

I get paper bag and set it next to where he is packing. I take his wrist as if he were a child and point to the bag.

"There," I say, "please throw your kleenex in the bag. I'm tired of picking them up."

"You gave me this cold," he reminds me, again.

Every time he says that I remember the one free afternoon I spent in bed with Jim and feel a rush of guilt. When Jim wanted to kiss me I pulled away.

"I have a cold," I said.

"I've got a cure," he grinned.

We made love; giggled, massaged each other, laughed

about the distance this cold might travel with two carriers like ourselves. And when he showed up red-nosed and sniffling a few days later, we toasted orange juice and aspirin.

I said, "I have a feeling this cold will go away when he does."

But he agrees to pitch his kleenex in the bag and I feel it's a great victory. My other requests (for putting dirty dishes in the sink, rinsing out the bath tub hairs, turning the stereo down late at night) he has ignored, or rejected as unreasonable. I'm always afraid of stepping on people's toes when I'm a guest, but he seems to expect me to value his presence so much that his rights as a guest are boundless. In time the favors I performed in his house no longer from me, but from a sense of obligation, of necessity. Fulfillment of his needs is the only way to keep peace in my home.

There is a party one Saturday night, a kegger. I don't know the people or the place, but my girlfriend Jo invites me and I want to immerse myself in it so badly I can taste the lukewarm beer over the phone.

Three days until he leaves. He is rushing to pack boxes for mailing, using my finger to tie the knots.

"I'm going to party with Jo tonight," I tell him.

He flicks the catch on his tape measure; it shoots back into its container with a shrill scrape of metal.

"You really don't care much about me at all, do you?"

he says.

"Of course, I care, but I want to see other people, too."

He shrugs. "Do what you have to do." With a crude snort he spits into a tissue and pitches it in the bag. The hurt on his face only makes me more determined to go through with my plans. To me, a kegger is a celebration of non-sense, completely free of any serious discussion about Life and Responsibility and Truth. Those things I'll leave with with him, to put in his boxes and secure with tape and string.

I run next door and ask my new neighbor to come along. "It's a good chance to meet some people," I tell her.

She is a pretty, small woman with a quick smile.

"Love to," she says.

"It might be better if you don't tell him we're going together," I add. "Since I'm not taking him."

She nods. It's such a relief not to have to explain myself in precise, faultless terms. She has met him a few times and seems to understand. It is one of those split second decisions that feels right, though I don't really know why he would object to her coming along. I sense that her going would compound his feelings of rejection, so it's better left a secret.

"I'll drive you there," he says, "because I want to use your car."

"What for?"

"What do your care? You're leaving, so it's none of your business."

I don't know what to say. He's found the weak link in my chain of plans. "I want my car, so I can come home when I'm ready."

"I'll pick you up. Call," he says.

"No. I want to come and go on my own."

"And leave me stuck here with nothing to do."

"You have packing to do."

"I'm tired of packing. I'll take you to the party."

"I'll ask Mindy if she can do it," I say. "Maybe she'll want to come along."

"She's going out with me," he says.

It's quite a bombshell. Now I'm really in a bind. Mindy said nothing about plans, so I'm wondering if he's making it up. My web is getting pretty tangled; it seems like the truth is the only way out.

"I already asked her," I confess. "And she told me she'd come."

"You what?"

"She didn't say anything about going out with you."

You deliberately fucked up my plans. You knew."

"I didn't."

"You jealous, deceiving bitch. You're not going anywhere."

To prove I am, I go into the bedroom and pull off the shirt I have on and put on a bright orange one. He stands in the doorway, legs spread like Colossus. Anger seethes from his eyes, his jaws locked quivering.

"Nobody treats me like this and gets away with it."

"I'm not treating you anyway. Mindy's a big girl-- apparently she decided she'd rather go with me."

"You're not going anywhere. If I have to stay here and be miserable, you'll be twice as miserable."

"Hah."

I mist my hair with perfume, grab my purse, and head for the door. He lunges for me; grips me by the arms; jerks me back into the room. I'm shocked but still determined.

"Let me go."

He shoves me into the wall and tightens his grip. My skin twists painfully between his fingers. If I strike he'll strike harder; if I kick he'll kick me in the face. I know it. Fear swells up inside me and my helplessness is all too clear in his eyes. I press my hands against his chest and push but he only smiles; shakes me so my head bangs again and again on the wall.'

"Nobody treats me like that. You're a snake, a rat, a lying evil bitch."

He shifts one hand to my wrist and bends it backwards till I kneel on the floor. I want to strike back, but something tells me not to. Fear warns me not to. I stay on

the floor and look away.

My first man-made bruises.

I curl up on my bed and cry. I don't know what this man wants from me, but I curl around myself and hold on tight. There is no place to run. Three more days. He moves around in the next room, wrestling with his boxes and I freeze whenever the footsteps sound too near. But he's done with me, he says. I wrote out a confession as he demanded. "I'm a rat, a snake, a liar, a thief..." and I promised I would change my ways.

I can't deny I did this to myself; pretending to care, promising changes I couldn't make, but I thought I could change him just by staying near. I had no wish to add to his distrust and isolation from people, only to prove it didn't have to be that way. Somehow my intentions grew distorted, even to me. I said love where I didn't mean it. I wanted love without returning it. It hurts.

I curl around myself and wait. I wait on him, on every sunset; watch for any flash of anger in his eyes. And when he comes to bed, swearing he meant to make me better, saying we'll meet again someday, I only smile.

Hysteria

At twenty-seven, she had spent the past nine years trying not to get pregnant, and had succeeded. The pill, the diaphragm, and finally, a thermometer, a chart, and planned abstinence. She was in a rather mystical phase and desired very much to find her natural rhythm with the cycles of the moon. In achieving this feat, she felt newly empowered, connected to the world as if by roots sunk deep from the bottoms of her wide caloused feet. The full moon in a blue black sky often set her to dancing between car and porch. Her late nights working at the bar inspired a nocturnal song in her soul that daylight people simply couldn't hear or feel. She pitied them. It was a sort of magic of possession whirling and leaping with palms raised unseen in the quiet dark hours, however briefly. A woman had to be careful in the time spent between car and porch in the wee hours, so her possession of universal energy was short and sweet.

In bed Ray's taut light body lay waiting to embrace her with the warmth of sleep. She loved the contrast of their forms and skins, when she could forget that she outweighed him. Her roundly padded body was too large for fashion and so she resented fashion, but Ray loved it,

called her woman, and so she loved him. She climbed under the covers and pressed her slightly night-cold and dance-warmed self against him, throwing one leg over his thighs as was her habit. He rose from sleep enough to give her his shoulder for a pillow and kiss her forehead. In the morning he would awaken first and hand her the thermometer, so that she could chart her temperature before they made love.

Being a man who liked mountains, horses, and the smell of leather goods, Ray liked this natural rhythm. too. Their life together seemed to glide note by note across the days like a song in the making. It was terribly romantic, and yet, seemed so sensibly down-to-earth.

Neither of them was young enough to feel invulnerable or to think that their love was indestructable. Its easy goodness made them both suspect that something bad was bound to happen, and together they would wonder aloud what that might be. For her part, Jessie was convinced that like her lovers in the past Ray would grow bored with her and find someone else. Ray protested this wasn't so, that he wanted to marry her and have babies together living amid the mountains, horses, and smell of leather. He told her, however, that he suspected the same of her.

She wanted to marry him, yes, and have babies, but no, she couldn't picture herself roughing it in the wilds of Montana. She would grow bored with the life, not with him; surely there was some way? Some compromise?

The conversation always ended there and the song played on for several more months. She worked nights and he days. Weekends they played hard. Her periods were as predictable as the phases of the moon. Sometimes it seemed that rhythm was their only security: The peaks and valleys of her temperature chart were theirs alone to know, and together they saw in those lines the potential, if not possible, future. A baby might mix the two of them somehow, connect them into a whole. They imagined what she, always she, would look like and made lists of what parts of themselves they would like her to have and which they would not.

In reality the lack of control over the outcome was scary: Neither of them had strong eyes to pass on.

Restlessness overcame Jessie as it always had, at the bar. For two years she had worked there as waitress and bartender and so all of the regulars knew her and she them as well as bar friends do. One of the men, Andy, began to look good to her. He was smarter than Ray, owned a house in the suburbs, and had a good-paying job without romantic dreams of escaping the ugly world in the woods. Andy liked beer, conversation, and store-bought goods. He was protective of Jessie and free with compliments about her brains and body. Once he gave her a glass-blown unicorn he bought because it reminded him of her when he was on a trip to Helena. Marriage and kids were not on his dream list, as he was quick to say, but if Jessie ever needed anything, well,

he'd be there.

At first his attention confused her, but gradually it made her bold. She didn't mention Andy to Ray, but instead tearily convinced him that their situation was impossible. They simply wanted different lifestyles. He belonged in the woods and she in town. She would always love him; in fact, he was the only man in her life who had ever made her feel she was loveable. She thanked him for that. They hugged and he moved out.

She moved in with Andy.

True to his word, Andy didn't try a thing with her. All of the sexual overtures were hers: It drove her crazy. He responded with the slow bulky movements of a bear just out of hibernation. Tight-lipped kisses sealed out the damp and his knowledge of her woman's body seemed limited to areas outside of erogenous zones. The water bed, the candlelight, the music and all the naked necessities were there in the suburbs with them, but her fantasy Andy was not.

"What's the matter? Don't you want me?" she asked.

Andy probably had no way of the knowing the importance of this particular question for Jessie. If a man did not want her, she was nothing and nobody to herself. "Wanting" was very narrowly defined in reference to her body, which, if unwanted, she began to despise and abuse. If he had known, he wouldn't have said, "Of course. I love

you. I like being with you." He would have been honest and admitted that he was inexperienced with women and didn't know what to do to please her, so he preferred to let her make the moves. Or, if he were really honest, he would have admitted that he was so damn drunk by the time they went to bed most nights that he only wanted to sleep, but was comforted by her near warm presence. At various times Jessie told herself that each of these reasons was true.

Jessie lost touch with the moon during her weeks with him. There was no joy in charting her temperature alone and for no unpredictable reason. Since she was in control of when and where, there was always time to put in her diaphragm before she made her move, but her desire to do so ebbed away with every night she sat staring at sitcoms while Andy's fingers caressed a beer mug instead of her. The old familiar feeling that she did not exist began to seep into her system and numb her brain.

At work she became disinterested in the customers, mainly because she herself felt uninteresting, as if she knew nothing worth saying. Her boss, Harvey, a little bald businessman who hadn't set foot in a bar until he bought one, took her aside one day.

"Are you all right?" he asked. "Some of the customers have been complaining that you don't smile or talk with them any more. We have to make people feel welcome, you know."

"I just don't feel like smiling," she told him, adding defensively, "I keep their glasses filled and their ashtrays clean."

Harvey frowned. "That's not enough, Jessica." To him her name was what he wrote on her paycheck and tax forms. "Now this is a warning. You'll have to perk up or I'll have to let you go."

"You want me to be a hypocrite? Why should I smile if I don't feel like it?"

"I don't like your tone, Jessica--or your attitude. Consider yourself warned. If I don't see a change in the next few days, you're out of a job. Is that clear?" Jessie shrugged, wishing he would just fire her then and there, so she wouldn't have to play this game for a week. "Sure," she said. "Change my attitude and smile. Got it." Afterwards she felt lousy for the way she'd talked to poor old Harvey, as she thought of him. He tried hard to fit in with the bar scene, but always looked comical sitting behind a tall ice cream drink; he couldn't stand the taste of alcohol. Short, bald, middle-aged, and hopelessly ignorant of bar life and manners, he was intolerant of the emotional content of the scene for employees and customers. She was sure none of the regulars had complained. Most likely it was some new man who'd come in and wanted to flirt with his waitress, who didn't flirt back. But though she knew Harvey was only doing what a boss needed to do, she knew she

couldn't do as he asked. She didn't want to. If she became "perky" she would keep her job and all would remain the same; if she didn't she would lose it and her life would have to change. She wanted a change and now she had a way to force someone to make it for her.

It was two days later that her pants were stained with a strange brown discharge. At first it was light and she didn't take much notice, figuring it was yet another yeast infection. Usually she prided herself on taking care of herself through regular pelvic and breast exams, but this time, because she failed to become perky, she was out of a job. She ignored the itching as best she could, waiting for her first unemployment check. One night though, she couldn't get warm.

Andy said, "You don't look too good." He felt her forehead and tucked an afghan around her in a chair before the fire. "You should go see a doctor."

She rolled her fevered eyes toward him and wished he would disappear. "When my check comes," she said.

"I'll lend you the money."

Feeling as bad as she did, it was tempting, but she had never allowed him to pay her way and didn't want to feel indebted to him, loathing him as she had begun to do. She said, "No thanks. Another couple of days won't hurt."

A couple of days was actually two weeks. She got her period and so had to wait another week after the check came.

Her tampons were going in at an odd angle and wouldn't stay in very well. She moved from bed to couch to chair, every day feeling thinner and weaker, more like an empty shell than a person. Andy didn't offer again after the first time, but now that she didn't want him near her he became more and more attentive and affectionate, always putting an arm around her or tucking her into her resting place. When she announced that she was going to the clinic one morning, he was visibly relieved. She hated him for caring now that she was weak and drained of all dignity. She hated needing his house to live in and knew she would leave it the minute she was able.

At the clinic she was examined by a nurse practitioner: The doctor only came one day a week. Jessie put her clothes back on and waited. The practitioner returned with a senior nurse who leaned in the doorway smiling sympathetically at Jessie. Her presence made Jessie ill at ease; there was usually only one staffer per patient at the clinic.

"You're sensitive to sulfa?" asked the first. Jessie nodded. "Well you have a pretty bad infection, and all I can give you without a prescription is sulfa-based, so you'll need to see a doctor."

"But I'm broke," Jessie protested. "That's why I come here."

This time the senior nurse in the doorway spoke. "You

really shouldn't wait for a week to see the doctor here. I recommend you see a gynecologist right away." Her tone was motherly, firm.

"But what is it?" Jessie asked. "A bad yeast infection?"

The first spoke again. "We won't know for sure until the lab report is back, but I felt some sort of growth on one of your ovaries, too. It could just be swelling from the infection, or it could be a cyst, but you need to see a doctor."

Suddenly frightened, Jessie asked if they could recommend a specialist. No, they couldn't. It was against professional ethics. So Jessie resorted to the phone book and chose a doctor named Campbell, because it was a Scottish name like hers.

He was humorless and rigid-faced, but very patient. He drew her a picture of the cyst on her left ovary and judged its size to be that of a baseball. "It will have to be removed," he said, "but I want to do a laparoscopy first to be sure of what we're dealing with. First I have to get the infection to turn around, so I'll give you these antibiotics for two weeks. Come back then and we'll schedule the surgery."

When questioned, he explained that a laparoscopy meant sending a telescope in through her belly button to take a look around. For a person who had never had surgery before,

the prospect was frightening. Jessie agreed to everything but left the office knowing she was going home, home to her mother, before anyone put a knife to her belly.

The first thing she did, however, was call Ray. He agreed to meet her for lunch and without question he agreed to accompany her home. "Sure Jess, I'll take you home," he said. "But can I ask what's with this guy, this Andy, you're living with?"

"I'm not really living with him, Ray," she told him. "Honest. I'm just staying at his house, that's all."

"Okay," he said, but he could not look at her as he said it. She could almost feel his pain herself. It must be humiliating, she thought, loving a woman who lies so boldly. She almost wished he would scream liar to her face and tell her he hoped she'd die. Something in her wanted to be punished for hurting this kind man so. But she needed him now and so she had to lie: If she told the truth, she wouldn't feel right about asking him this favor.

As she was packing her things, searching the headboard of Andy's waterbed for a pair of earrings she had laid there, she found a card. It was inside an envelope with Andy's name written in female hand on the front. For a long while she sat wondering whether to open it or not, and then did. It was one of those gooey romantic cards with two lovers walking on a sunset beach. There was no prepared message; only a handwritten one inside:

Dear Andy,

Thanks for being so wonderful last night,
and thanks for letting me be me.

Love, Mary

She knew the writing. She knew Mary. Mary had worked with her at the bar. She was a notoriously raunchy and loose woman who made no secret of sleeping around. Well, maybe that was what turned Andy on, and why she didn't do so. Maybe she was the real Mary and this Mary was his Eve. It must have been, she thought, the night I went to stay with Sheila. The timing was right, she reasoned, as rage rose slowly from deep inside her with the sure knowledge that this infection was Mary's doing. Mary via Andy, Andy who knew he had it but didn't want to tell her, and resisted making love to her, but if she insisted, well...what could he do?

She had told him she was going home, and that she was going with Ray, but she hadn't told him she wouldn't be back. Now she would tell him. Taking a knife from the kitchen she slashed the water bed again and again screaming, "Fuck you! Fuck you!" It was all she could think to scream, even though the irony of it only increased her anger. She slashed his drapes and his ugly paintings of ducks and geese; she slashed stuffing out of the furniture and gouged deep grooves in the table top. She drove the knife into every object she came near until exhausted she

fell panting to the floor and cried.

By the time she got her second opinion, the estimated size of the growth was that of a grapefruit. She was scheduled for surgery the following week. The left ovary would be removed. She learned that periods would still come monthly, because the one remaining ovary would do double duty, so her chances for children were still good.

"But what kind of infection is it?" she asked him.

"P.I.D.," he replied. To her lost expression, he added, "Pelvic Inflammatory Disease."

"That's kind of nondescript," she told him. "What causes it?"

With a shrug he said, "Any number of things."

For hours she floated in and out of drug-induced sleep having real and terrible dreams. And the pain, the pain was very real whenever she came to the surface of consciousness. Her eyes would open on her mother's worried face and Ray's kind smile for a moment and then the pain would drive her willingly back to sleep, where she met with people she had known who were now dead.

It was late that night before the anaesthetic wore off enough that she could talk. They were still there, loyally and patiently awaiting her return. She managed a smile that looked more like a wince. The pain in her abdomen traveled quickly throughout her body with the slightest movement, and she learned that moving meant gripping the guard rails and

pulling her whole weight up and then onto her side.

The nurse came in. "Do you need a shot for the pain?" As she asked she checked the IV needle in Jessie's arm.

"Yes."

"I'll be right back with it," she said, checking her pulse. "You can have one every few hours, but you should try to go as long as possible in between them."

"I didn't think it would hurt this much," Jessie told her. "The way the doctor described it."

The nurse was younger than Jessie, and rather plain with her mousey hair pulled back in a covered rubber band at the base of her neck. She smiled tolerantly, but was obviously tired of being blamed for pain that was not her fault. "Oh, didn't you know about your surgery?" There was an edge of sarcasm in her question. "A hysterectomy is major surgery. You've got several layers of stitches inside and out."

"What?" Jessie gasped. She knew she'd heard correctly, but was sure there must be some mistake.

"Doctor didn't tell you?" asked the nurse.

"Tell me what? What happened?"

The nurse sighed heavily. "I'm sorry," she said. "Doctor will explain everything in the morning on his rounds." She left with quick efficiency, her next task in mind. Jessie was just a stop in her rounds, and it was too bad, but that's how doctors were and she was tired taking

the flak for their mistakes.

Jessie was still unconvinced, though shaken and nauseous from the scare. She rolled her head to look at her mother and Ray. The truth was written all over them. Her mother was perched on the edge of her chair white-faced and trembling. Ray leaned forward to cup his face in his hands and hide his tears.

"Why?" Jessie hissed at them.

"He had to, Honey," her mother insisted, as if trying to defend and convince herself at once. She looked old and helpless and Jessie in that moment despised her and blamed her for failing to prevent this desecration of her body, this treachery.

Her mother drew a breath and continued, but could only look at her own hands tumbling over themselves in her lap. "You hadn't been in there very long when he called in another doctor, the head of surgery. Then they came out and told me the infection had spread everywhere. Everything was scarred and fused together. He could only take the one ovary and close you back up, but you'd be back in few weeks for the rest. He said you couldn't have babies anyway. I told him to go ahead. I didn't know what else to do. I'm I'm sorry."

Ray squirmed in his chair throughout the story, re-living the scene in his own mind. "I'd like to kill that nurse," he said finally.

For six days in the hospital and six weeks of recovery at her mother's house, Jessie swam in uncharted waters of herself. Every movement brought pain to remind her she was severed from the safety of knowing who she was anymore, and she drifted far from any familiar shore, feeling totally alone and without a destination. Ray, before he left to return to Montana, said once again that he wanted to marry her, babies or no, but she said she couldn't give him what she didn't have--herself. Old friends came to visit, but she barely saw them, far away from her as they were. Her mother skittered around her like a dried leaf, a noise without comfort, a weightless shape driven by the winds of Jessie's daily needs. Jessie sat in a chaise lounge on the porch most days and watched the horizon for a sign of land.

Without her womb she had no purpose that she could see. A womb was a vessel for traveling from past to present; it had been her anchor and her source of power to define herself, even if she didn't actually use it, she knew it was there with the promise of a possible future. If she could be nothing else she could always be a mother and by that be reborn, immortal, eternally connected to this life. Without a womb, she thought, I am just like a man. No wonder they're so paranoid about knowing who their children are. What else do they own of the future? Nothing. Like me.

Near the end of one day, when the moon and sun shared

the sky for an hour, Jessie studied the exchange of power in the slowly growing darkness. Like a tipped cup the moon seemed to drench her in black liquid. When its contents were emptied she matched its shape with a crooked frozen smile, recalling how she used to dance beneath it. That smile would become her trademark, distinctive as a scar, and men would seek but never find its source.